TRADITION AND ISLAMIC LEARNING

Singapore Students in the Al-Azhar University

NORSHAHRIL SAAT

ISEAS
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INSTITUTE

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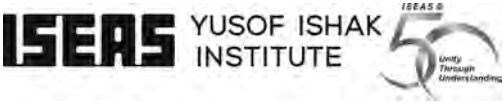

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This book is in honour of
Shaikh Syed Isa Semait,
the second Mufti of Singapore

I dedicate this book to my daughter, Nuha
May she be an inspiration to society

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PREFACE

> Initially, it wasn't my personal choice [to study at Al-Azhar]. I wanted to go to a polytechnic, but my parents wanted me to go to the Al-Azhar University and pursue the *ukhrawi* (religious) field. They wanted this for me since I was in Primary 1.
>
> *Fazlurrahman Sidek, a Singaporean studying at the Al-Azhar University*

In May 2017, an online British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) current affairs programme, *Heart and Soul*, scrutinized the Al-Azhar University's effectiveness in combating Islamic extremism and radicalism. The episode, entitled *The Battle for Al-Azhar,* questioned whether the mode of learning promoted by the university remains relevant in this modern day and age, especially when some scholars had described its curriculum to be antiquated and unreformed.[1] They also asked if the university is doing enough to counter radical ideas promoted by groups such as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Al-Qaeda, given that individuals sympathetic to their struggle also referred to the classical texts taught by the university's professors. Some analysts posited that in tackling violence, Al-Azhar is the problem and not the solution.

Yet, the millennium-old Egyptian university remains the most popular destination for Singapore *madrasah* (Islamic religious

schools) students seeking a degree in Islamic studies. Many Singapore Malay-Muslim parents consider the Al-Azhar as the centre of "moderate" Islam. The university is the standard bearer of Sunni Islam, and it teaches the Shafie School of jurisprudence, one of the four Sunni school of jurisprudence that Muslims in the Malay world generally adhere to. In fact, Al-Azhar remains the top choice for Southeast Asian Islamic studies students, even though there are other centres of Islamic learning offering better scholarships, such as the universities in Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Kuwait.

The Al-Azhar University is arguably the first university in the world, and it has been the centre of Islamic learning for centuries. Established in the tenth century, Al-Azhar is one of the earliest in the world to issue degrees to its students. Al-Azhar did shape the religious discourse not only in Arabia but also in Southeast Asia. For example, in the early twentieth century, returning students from Cairo brought back reform ideas to Singapore, which was then already a cosmopolitan British town. These returnees inspired the progressive movement in the Malay world, referred to as the *Kaum Muda* (young camp). The movement included individuals like Syed Shaykh Al-Hady, Muhammad Tahir Jalaluddin and Haji Abbas Taha, who championed the ideas of the Grand Mufti of Al-Azhar then — Sheikh Muhammad Abduh (b. 1849 – d. 1905). The Grand Mufti of Al-Azhar is the highest Islamic authority in Egypt and considered the leading Islamic authority of the Sunni world. The progressives in the Malay world promoted discourses like women emancipation and moving Islam beyond rituals, topics considered taboo by the *Kaum Tua* (conservative group).

To date, I have not come across any study which examines the impact of Al-Azhar education in contemporary Singapore, even though the number of Singapore students studying in the university has increased exponentially compared to the

early twentieth century. There have been works that highlight individuals who shaped the religious life and discourse in Singapore during the pre-independence period and point out the role of the Al-Azhar University in training them (Firdaus, Wan Hussein and Mohd Raman 2010; Syed Zakir 2016), but there has never been an in-depth study on the institution's curriculum and mode of education. In filling this gap, this monograph examines Al-Azhar's connection with contemporary Singapore, particularly the learning experience of Singaporean students in Al-Azhar. For decades, Singapore students have gone to Cairo and enrolled into the University upon completion of their GCE "A" levels (pre-university levels) or diploma. These students would be 18 or 19 years old when they entered Al-Azhar.

These Al-Azhar graduates (known as Azharites) have made numerous contributions to Singapore's Islamic discourse. Prominent Al-Azhar graduates from Singapore include former Mufti Syed Isa Semait (served as Mufti 1972–2011) and the current Mufti Dr Mohamed Fatris Bakaram (2011–present). Some of these Al-Azhar graduates serve in the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura or Muis), a statutory body formed by the Singapore government to administer Islamic affairs. Majority of the Al-Azhar graduates take up roles as religious teachers in the *madrasahs* or become independent preachers (*pendakwah*). To be sure, the Al-Azhar education serves as the rites of passage for many Singapore *madrasah* graduates before one becomes an *alim*. Despite its contributions to Singaporean religious life, the learning experience of Singaporeans studying in the Al-Azhar University has not been properly documented.

This monograph has three objectives. First, it hopes to highlight the significance of the Al-Azhar graduates in the broader context of understanding Islamic discourse and learning in Singapore. Some *madrasahs* tweaked their curriculum to suit the

entry requirements for the university. Moreover, the thinking of the religious elites in Singapore is influenced by their mentors and teachers from the university; they cite their works, and to some extent, glorify them.

Second, this ethnographic study departs from the existing studies on Muslims in Singapore through the security lens, especially after 9/11. Studying the Muslim community in Singapore, and the connection it has with the Middle East, should transcend terrorism and radicalism, which gained traction with the rise of radical groups such as the Jemaah Islamiah (JI) and ISIS. There are many other issues concerning Islamic thought and reforms that deserves scrutiny, such as reforms in the *shariah* courts, religious institutions, and particularly problems associated with traditionalism and conservatism and their impact on modernisation (Azhar 2014; Noor Aisha 2008). For any form of reforms to take place, it should begin with a proper understanding of the religious education, the religious elites, and their mode of thinking. Understandably, this monograph only focuses on the Al-Azhar University graduates because it is a preliminary study and does not intend to make any big claims. I hope that more studies on Islamic studies graduates from the other Islamic universities — both in the Middle East and Asia — will follow suit.

Third, this monograph attempts to build on existing academic studies that analyse the *madrasah* education in Singapore. These works are mostly descriptive in nature and less about discussing its challenges and problems. Only a handful of scholars undertook a critical approach of the Islamic education system. However, this monograph is neither a critique of the Singapore Al-Azhar graduates nor a glorification of their institution of learning. It is a fact-finding study to understand the religious experience of *madrasah* students who went on to pursue a degree from the university. What are their struggles and challenges? What are

their career paths? Is there an Al-Azhar "school of thought" that Singapore students adhere to?

Answering these basic questions will allow readers to understand the mechanics of the Al-Azhar system, its merits and its problems. This monograph hopes that other researchers will probe further into the gaps of Singapore's religious education system, providing useful information for the authorities to improve the policies concerning *madrasah* education in general. Policymakers can then determine if Al-Azhar remains the ideal institute of Islamic learning for *madrasah* students and how best can returning graduates apply their knowledge in the context of a multiracial and multireligious Singapore.

Note

1. You may hear the programme through the link <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p052nstm> (accessed 9 October 2017).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In 2015, the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (Muis) awarded me the Shaikh Syed Isa Semait Scholarship (SISS), an award named in honour of Singapore's former Mufti. The award has allowed me to carry out this preliminary study on Singapore students studying at the Al-Azhar University in Egypt. I would like to convey my deepest appreciation to Muis, particularly the Muis Academy, for making me the first SISS recipient, and for all its support rendered to the project. I wish to express my gratitude to Shaikh Syed Isa Semait, the former Mufti of Singapore, for sharing his insights on his Al-Azhar journey. I hope this monograph will do justice to him as the scholarship that funds this project bears his name. He has been a source of inspiration for me. May his voice of moderation and humility resonate among the religious elites in the country and help the community grow into a progressive one.

I extend my heartfelt thanks to my family members, especially to my wife, Sarina Mohamed Rasol, my father, Haji Saat Dawood, my mother, Hajjah Azizah Sahlan, and my family members, Norshahizal Saat and Siti Radiah Mohamed Shariff for the moral support and prayers.

I also wish to thank Mr Tan Chin Tiong, former Director of ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, for all his support towards my academic development. He was the one who encouraged me to understand the Middle East impact in Southeast Asia, and I hope this monograph can contribute to a better understanding of Islamic thought in the Malay world.

This project would not have been possible without the assistance of three Al-Azhar undergraduates who were completing their studies when this research was carried out: Nur Diyana Zait, Nur Azyan Roslan and Diyanah Md Sirat. I am also thankful to my research assistants Muhammad Suhail Mohamed Yazid and Radhiah Ramli from the National University of Singapore (NUS) for helping to transcribe the interviews.

I would like to express my sincere appreciation to the principals of Madrasah Al-Maarif, Madrasah Aljunied and Madrasah Alsagoff: Ustazah Sukarti Asmoin, Ustaz Mahmoud Mathlub Sidek and Syed Mustafa Alsagoff, respectively. With the exception of a few, I could not reveal the names of those whom I have interviewed for this book for ethical reasons. During my conversations with the participants, I urged them to speak their minds, reflecting about their Al-Azhar journey. I had to maintain confidentiality of their identity. On that note, I wish to thank the former and current Al-Azhar students who have agreed to participate in my survey and in-depth interviews. I pray that they will provide good religious guidance to the Malay/Muslim community in Singapore upon their graduation. I also appreciate the help rendered by Ahmad Haziq Roslee, Hafizah Abdul Rashid, Muhammad Shafeeq Abdul Talib and Nur Hidayah Mohammad Ismail for the photographs included in this book. Credits to the photographs go to them.

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Thank you!

ABBREVIATIONS

AMLA	Administration of Muslim Law Act
API	Akademi Pengajian Islam (Islamic Studies Academy)
ASWJ	*ahlus sunnah wal jamaah* (Sunni)
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
IIUM	International Islamic University of Malaysia
Ikhwanul Muslimin	Muslim Brotherhood
INFAD	World Fatwa Management and Research Institute
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
JAKIM	Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (Department of Islamic Development Malaysia)
JC	junior college
LBKM	Lembaga Biasiswa Kenangan Maulud (Prophet Muhammad's Birthday Memorial Scholarship Fund Board)
LNO	letter of no objection
Mendaki	Council for the Development of Singapore Malay/Muslim Community
MTFA	Muslimin Trust Fund Association

Muhammadiyah	Muhammadiyah Organization
MUI	Majelis Ulama Indonesia (Ulama Council of Indonesia)
Muis	Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (Islamic Religious Council of Singapore)
NGO	non-governmental organizations
NU	Nahdlatul Ulama (Revival of the Ulama)
NUS	National University of Singapore
PAS	Parti Islam Se Malaysia (Pan Malaysian Islamic Party)
Pergas	Persatuan Guru-Guru Agama dan Ulama Singapura (Singapore Islamic Scholars and Religious Teachers Association)
Perkemas	Singapore Students Welfare Assembly in Cairo
PMRAM	Persekutuan Melayu Republik Arab Mesir (Malay Federation of the Arab Republic of Egypt)
PSLE	Primary School Leaving Examinations
PUM	Persatuan Ulama Malaysia (Ulama Organization of Malaysia)
STAM	Sijil Tinggi Agama Malaysia (Malaysian Higher Islamic Religious Certificate)
STU	Sijil Tinggi Ugama (Higher Islamic Religious Certificate)
UKM	Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (National University of Malaysia)
UM	Universiti Malaya
UMNO	United Malays National Organization
USIM	Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (Islamic Science University of Malaysia)
USM	Universiti Sains Malaysia (Science University of Malaysia)

A NOTE ON TRANSLATION, SPELLING AND OTHER CONVENTIONS

This study relies on primary interviews originally written or spoken in the Malay language and translated into English by the author. Some of the interviews were carried out through e-mail correspondence.

The book retains plural forms of the Arabic terms. For example, the term *ulama* refers to the plural for religious scholars. A religious scholar is referred to as an *alim*.

Non-English terms are *italicized*.

Most interviewees are identified by pseudonyms to protect their identity. There are some exceptions, such as the interview with Shaykh Syed Isa Semait, the former Mufti of Singapore.

Malay and Indonesian authors are identified by their first names, not surnames. Hence, Norshahril Saat is cited as "Norshahril" rather than "Saat", and Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman is cited as "Noor Aisha" rather than "Abdul Rahman". However, Arabic names are treated in the same manner as English names, and their family names are identified. Hence, Yusof al-Qaradawi is cited as "al-Qaradawi", similar to "Hefner" for Robert Hefner.

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION
Islamic Education and Religious Authority

The definition of religious authority varies across different faith groups. In Christianity and Catholicism, there is a concept of ordained priesthoods. In Catholicism, the Pope is the highest religious authority, and a symbol of unity among the faithful. His centre of authority is in the Vatican, Rome. While priests and bishops serve as intermediaries between God and man, the same claim cannot be made about the *ulama* (Islamic religious scholars), though they also fulfil the role as providers of religious guidance on theological matters to the masses. In Islam, religious authority is decentralized; even the religious scholars in Islam's holiest city Mecca (Saudi Arabia) cannot claim to be the central authority of the Islamic world. When Muslims were living under the caliphate system, the Sultan was regarded as a political authority rather than a religious one.[1]

Ulama refers to a learned group of men well versed in the Islamic religious sciences, and are moral guardians of faith and the gatekeepers of religion. The Quran, Islam's holiest scripture,

mentions the term *ulama* twice. A narration of the Prophet Muhammad referred to the group as *waratsatul anbiya* or the "heirs" of the Prophet. However, there are Muslims who prefer to treat the *ulama* as ideal social groups rather than referring to any specific individuals (Norshahril 2015).[2] The *ulama* as a social group is a product of human construction, and not one that is divinely appointed. *Ulama* for one community may not be considered as one in another community. This begs the question as to who has legitimacy in the religious community to speak on theological matters. This contestation also exists within the same community, depending on which criteria the group holds. Some communities emphasize on knowledge as the most important marker that differentiates a religious scholar and a layperson, and hence, authority is measured based on the number of books the *alim* (singular for *ulama*) has written or the originality of his ideas. Yet, in other communities, a scholar must possess the ability to cure the sick, or in other words, magical powers. The *alim* must reflect some form of divine inspiration, even though of lesser degree compared to the Prophet Muhammad, who died in AD 632. According to the Islamic belief, the Prophet received divine orders (*wahyu*) directly from God.

The way the religious authority is understood also differs within the Sunni and Shia sects. This is not to say that the two sects are homogeneous to begin with. For instance, among Sunni Muslims, the way certain Sufi (spiritual/mystical) groups understand authority could depend on their leader's lineage. Some religious leaders, particularly the Sayyids (spelt as Syeds in Singapore), claim to be the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, through his daughter Fatimah, who married his cousin Ali Abu Talib. Some Shia groups believe that their leaders are divinely guided and given the sole authority to interpret the religion.

The term *ulama* is also contested by Muslim intellectuals. They spoke about the need to broaden the concept of *ulama* to include experts in other fields of knowledge, such as economics, physics, philosophy, political science (Alatas 2015). Following this line of argument, those trained in the religious sciences may not necessarily qualify as *ulama* because they are not equipped with modern knowledge required to understand contemporary problems and find the necessary solutions for the same. Such is the complexity in defining the *ulama*.

RELIGIOUS TRAINING, TRADITION AND AUTHORITY

Religious authority can take many forms (Weber 1963). A leader can obtain legitimacy based on enacted rules or system. He has the legal right to issue an order by his position because he is sanctioned by the state or the constitution. Related to our subject of Islamic authority in Singapore, an example of a person with his authority clearly defined is the Mufti, who has the powers to issue *fatwa* (legal rulings). This form of religious authority is common in the contemporary modern setting, given the establishment of religious bureaucracies and secular states. Governments bestow and define the powers of the religious bureaucracies, which then regulate how religious laws are enacted and the extent of their powers.

The religious community also defines religious authority based on their closeness to religious tradition. This is befitting to the traits accorded to *ulama* as gatekeepers of traditions. "Traditions" here refer to values and principles that bind the identity of a community. It also helps shape and mould the worldview of the people's traditions (Shaharuddin 1992, pp. 242–43). Traditions are not static and can be modified to meet new challenges and needs.

Anachronistic elements of the tradition can also be discarded. It comes in the form of culture, laws, and religion. In Islam, the source of traditions is fundamentally the Quran and the Hadith, but other sources such as writing by scholars also form the corpus of traditions. When discussing about the Malay society, customary laws in line with Islamic teachings are also part of their cultural heritage. The community respects the person who understands and lives up to its traditions. The person must also be someone knowledgeable.

Apart from knowledge and commitment to traditions, projection of piety is an essential trait for someone who wants to be considered an *alim*. The scholar must portray good character: one who never lies, gambles, steals or gossips. He must be a just, devout family man, and someone who shows strong desire to help the poor or less fortunate. A good *alim* must not miss his rituals, such as his five daily prayers, payment of tithe before they are due, fast during the month of Ramadhan (ninth month of the Islamic calendar), and performing of pilgrimage to Mecca (modern-day Saudi Arabia). As such, the society generally frowns if those trained in the religious sciences take up jobs deemed non-Islamic, particularly jobs in the entertainment industry, casinos or breweries.

Furthermore, he must be someone who has touched the lives of his followers. In other words, he must possess some form of charisma. When he speaks, his views will be heard and followed. Thus, an *alim* is someone who has significant impact on the lives of his congregation. A leader can also be selected by his followers based on irrational forms. The followers consider their leader as someone who possesses supernatural powers and magic. Irrational forms of authority could also derive from how the leader dresses, speaks and conducts himself in public, and less on evaluation of ideas and skills. He can be legitimized

through the prescriptions of traditions that induce obedience (Norshahril 2015, p. 11).

More importantly, an *alim* can be judged to be learned based on the college or university he attended. Here, an Islamic degree from one of the Middle Eastern universities is deemed more prestigious compared to one from the other parts of the world. For the Sunni world, the Al-Azhar University in Egypt remains the most respected centre of Islamic learning. Other universities that have credible standing in today's context are the Madinah University in Saudi Arabia and Yarmouk University in Jordan. These Middle Eastern universities remain ideal institutes for higher learning for many Southeast Asian religious studies students, even though there are equal, if not better, Islamic studies degree programmes offered by Western universities such as those in the United States, United Kingdom and Australia.

Yet, educational affiliation alone may not be enough to improve one's social standing in the eyes of the community. While most of the religious elites in Southeast Asia are trained in the religious sciences, there are individuals who remain active in the religious establishment without formally receiving training in the *madrasahs*. They studied religion as part-time students.[3] This again proves the fluidity of what constitutes formal authority and legitimacy. Religious authority is best explained through an accumulation of three variables: training in the religious sciences, charisma and society's perception of piety. This book covers only one and the most fundamental variable that defines authority, which is religious training.

Given the fluidity in measuring religious authority, this book applies the term *ulama* the way it is used by many Muslims in the Malay world, referring to the religious elite trained in the religious sciences. The *ulama* here includes those trained in Islamic disciplines such as law, exegesis, theology and traditions

of the Prophet. Upon graduation, they normally take up key positions in Islamic institutions, functioning as jurists, muftis (state-appointed religious scholars who issue religious rulings), grammarians, teachers in mosques, and writers of Quranic commentary. The religious community expects them to be able to converse in Arabic. The Malays, for instance, are generally not Arabic speaking, while Arabic is the original language in which the Quran was revealed. In fact, classical religious texts are all written in Arabic. Hence, they refer to the *ulama* to interpret the Quran and classical Islamic sources on their behalf.

MIDDLE EAST INFLUENCE ON SOUTHEAST ASIA

A study of the genesis of religious authority in the Malay world has to trace its connections with the Middle East. For centuries, Malays who seek to deepen their understanding in Islam would travel to the Middle East. Besides, Muslims would travel to Mecca at least once in their lifetime to complete their obligatory pilgrimage. Thus, the Middle East connection with the Malay world cannot be discarded.

Recently, the Middle East impact in Southeast Asia has received negative publicity. There is increasing thought that Muslims in Southeast Asia are becoming puritan or exclusivists in their orientation, in what many scholars define as Wahhabi-Salafi in their orientation. The threat of radical groups (such as Al Qaeda and Islamic State in Iraq and Syria or ISIS) originating from the Middle East did not help improve these negative perceptions. The change in attitudes of the Southeast Asian Muslims towards conservatism or the extreme forms of radicalism is often regarded by scholars as the "conservative" turn or the departure of Southeast Asian Islam. Another common perception is that terrorism originates from the Middle East. These works

argue that the writings of Muslim ideologues inspire terrorists such as Syed Qutb, who was a prominent and celebrated figure in the Muslim Brotherhood movement, and inspire radical groups. Jemaah Islamiah (JI) followers read these works and thus strived to create *daulah Islamiyyah* (Islamic State) in Southeast Asia. There were other commentaries in the newspapers that spoke about the changing fashion of the Muslim women. More Malay women are putting on the *niqab*, a veil covering all of the face except the eyes, which in the past is unheard of in the Malay world.

Since Islam originates from Arabia, it is understandable that Southeast Asian Muslims consider the Middle East as the centre of Islam. Their emotional attachment to the Middle East resulted in many wanting to study in the Middle Eastern universities to deepen their knowledge on Islam. They wanted to immerse themselves with the Arabs' way of life and become an expert in their language. They felt that these are necessary steps before they could unlock the verses from Islam's sacred texts.

Fundamentally, Islam does not value one culture over another, but upholds universal values cutting across geographical and cultural boundaries. Islam was brought to the Malay world by traders from the Middle East (particularly Hadramaut, Yemen), explorers from China and preachers from India. The religion came centuries before the Europeans colonized the Malay Archipelago, though it is difficult to establish the exact date Islam came to the region because of the lack of information, historical evidence or documents (Al-Attas 2011, p. xiii). Relying only on hard evidence, such as colonial writings or artefacts (such as coins, paintings, and containers), would be insufficient to reconstruct the history of Islamization.

Scholars pay interest in the connections between the Islamic institutions of higher learning in Middle East and those

in Southeast Asia. Azyumardi's (2004) *The Origins of Islamic Reformism in Southeast Asia* traces the networks of scholars from the Grand Mosque in Mecca with those in Southeast Asia. It shows the ties between the two regions were close, resulting from pilgrimage and interactions at institutions of higher learning. Lately, there have been greater interests by scholars to examine the impact of Middle Eastern universities in spreading Islamic ideas across the globe. One work relevant to this current study is by Abaza (1994), who looks at Indonesian students in Cairo. Her work traces the Al-Azhar University's influence on Indonesian Islam in terms of ideas and institutions. Showcasing strong anthropological study, Abaza discusses among others student life, exchange of ideas (such as feminism and modernism), and housing issues (Abaza 1994).

Other works that examine the Middle Eastern universities and institutions of learning, and how they impact Southeast Asia are by Bano (2015) and Kushimono (2015). These works are part of an edited volume entitled *Shaping Global Islamic Discourses: The Role of Al-Azhar, Al-Medina and Al-Mustafa*. The two articles discuss the impact of the Al-Azhar University education on Islamic thought. Kushimono's article, for example, focuses specifically on the impact of Al-Azhar graduates on Malaysian institutions, tracing the reasons why the Malaysian government supports students studying in Al-Azhar and how Malaysia's religious curriculum is heavily designed to facilitate Malaysians studying there.

Nevertheless, Muslims in Southeast Asia have developed their own brand of Islam different from the Middle East. They uphold an important Islamic principle that respects local traditions and culture. This means that Southeast Asian Muslims continue to practise their local customs, traditions, arts, fashion and rituals, as long as they do not contradict Islam's monotheism. On legal matters not covered in the Quran and Sunnah, customs in the

Malay-Muslim world continue to be practised. Colonial scholars saw this mix of Islam and Malay customs as a point of tension, leading them to conclude that Islam has minimal influence on Malay social and political life. Some colonial scholars went so far as to suggest that Islam degraded Malay traditions and customs, even though Islam is neutral towards many of the community's cultural values and practices. Today, some Muslim groups in Indonesia promoted the notion of "Islam Nusantara", a version of religious identity that appreciates local cultures and needs.

THE AL-AZHAR UNIVERSITY AND RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY

This monograph's discussion of religious authority in Southeast Asia, and its Middle East connections, would not be complete without a discussion of the Al-Azhar University. It is in the scope of this monograph to discuss the influence of the 1,000-year-old Islamic university on Southeast Asia, particularly Singapore. Al-Azhar remains the most popular destination for Southeast Asian students pursuing religious studies. Parents choose to send their children to Al-Azhar because it teaches the Sunni school of Islam, which majority of Malays adhere to. Al-Azhar also exposes its students to other schools of thought, despite being largely Sunni. More importantly, Al-Azhar, according to some graduates, teaches the students about moderation.

The Al-Azhar has produced many outstanding graduates in Southeast Asia. Some have occupied important positions in the religious bureaucracy and functioned as muftis or jurists in their respective states. Al-Azhar's mode of transmission is Arabic, the language in which the Quran is revealed. Thus, Southeast Asian students who wish to improve their command of the Arabic language would choose the Al-Azhar University. Some parents

equip their children with basic Arabic and religious education in anticipation of sending their children to study in Al-Azhar one day to become an *alim*. Although an important area of study, the religious experience of students studying in Al-Azhar has been under-researched. So far, more attention has been given to students studying in the local Singapore *madrasahs* from primary to pre-university levels, compared to those studying at the university level. This monograph hopes to fill this lacuna.

MADRASAH EDUCATION SYSTEM IN SINGAPORE

Muslims in Singapore make up about 13 per cent of Singapore's population of about 5.6 million people, and majority of Muslims there are Malays. The Muslims consider the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura, or Muis) as the highest Islamic authority in the country. The council came into being resulting from the Administration of Muslim Law Act (AMLA) which came into effect in 1968. The Council mainly undertakes the following functions: administration of *zakat* (tithes), *wakaf* (endowments), *haj* (pilgrims), halal certification, *madrasahs* (Islamic schools) and *fatwas* (religious rulings) (Funston 2006, p. 73). Muis is partly funded by the government, but most of its resources come from the community and endowments.

Although AMLA underlines Muis' role in Islamic education, it was only in 1989 that Muis set up its Religious Education Unit.[4] By 1990, Muis began to play a bigger role in determining the registration of *madrasah* students and approving its curriculum. In 1994, a Madrasah Fund was also set up to assist the *madrasahs* financially and the funds were mainly contributions from the Muslim community, Muis and Mendaki (Chee 2006, p. 19). The

funds were mainly used to raise teachers' salaries and upgrade school facilities such as the library and audio-visual facilities. For the longest time, students studying in the *madrasahs* were denied financial schemes that were extended to students studying in government schools. It was only in 2014 that *madrasah* students were given Edusave accounts (an annual government contribution), the entitlement of which other Singapore students between the ages of 7 and 16 receive from the government.

Almost all Singapore students studying at the Al-Azhar University come from one of the six *madrasahs* in Singapore. These *madrasahs* were founded by philanthropists and built on *waqf* land or endowments. There were many more *madrasahs* in the past, but they were closed due to financial difficulties, low student enrolments and lack of support by the colonial government (Chee 2006). Some of these *madrasahs* have existed for almost a century (for example, Aljunied was founded in 1927, and Al-Maarif in 1936). In fact, Alsagoff was founded in 1912. There are six *madrasahs* that remain today and they are Alsagoff Al-Arabiah, Al-Maarif Al-Islamiah, Wak Tanjong, Al-Irsyad, Aljunied and Al-Arabiah. In the past, all *madrasahs* offer primary, secondary and pre-university education, with Aljunied sending the highest number of students to the Al-Azhar.

The *madrasah* system underwent a major rearrangement in 2008 with the introduction of the Joint Madrasah System (JMS). These changes were made in response to the issues raised by the government in the late 1990s and early 2000s, mainly *madrasahs*' underperformance and inability to equip its students with necessary knowledge for the economy. Three *madrasahs* joined the JMS scheme: Al-Arabiah, Aljunied and Al-Irsyad. Since its introduction, Al-Irsyad takes in students at the primary level in which students will graduate after the sixth grade through the Primary School Leaving Examinations (PSLE). These students can

choose to either join Aljunied, which focuses more on religious subjects, or Al-Arabiah, which gives more weightage on secular subjects. Non-JMS *madrasahs* continue to conduct classes from primary to secondary levels. However, the non-JMS *madrasahs* may not be allowed to enrol students at the primary one level for a few years if they do not meet the minimum scores for the national PSLE examinations set by the Ministry of Education (MOE).

SUMMARY

This monograph throws light on the concerns many scholars have towards the Middle East impact in Southeast Asia, particularly the religious discourse and authority in Singapore. It focuses on the graduates of Islamic studies from the prestigious Al-Azhar University in Cairo, and their learning experiences studying in the university. This monograph looks at whether the religious training acquired from the university meets the society's expectations on what is required of a religious scholar, particularly when they return home.

This monograph combines both historical and contemporary analysis of Al-Azhar undergraduates of Southeast Asian origin, particularly on Singapore students. I have conducted a survey of thirty-seven students currently studying in Al-Azhar, and the questions asked are mainly regarding their perceptions towards the classes conducted in the university and the student life there. I have also followed up with in-depth interviews with twenty current students studying there in Egypt. The purpose of the interviews is to understand the factors, which motivated them to study in the university, as well as the challenges they face. I also interviewed the graduates of the university who are currently teaching in *madrasahs* or serving in Islamic institutions in Singapore. They include the principals of local *madrasahs* and

also former Mufti of Singapore, Shaikh Syed Isa Semait. Three Al-Azhar alumni from Malaysia were also interviewed in order to obtain some form of comparison.

In Chapter 2, I recap the history of the Al-Azhar University from its founding in the tenth century to the present day. This chapter is not meant to provide an all-encompassing history of the university except to highlight important episodes. Of interest to this region is more recent developments such as the modernist movement at the turn of the twentieth century, which sparked the *Kaum Muda/Kaum Tua* contestations (between modernist reformers and conservative traditionalists), and the rise of Muslim Brotherhood ideologues in Egypt's religious-political sphere, such as Syed Qutb and Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, who continue to have a significant following in Southeast Asia today.

Chapter 3 mainly focuses on several key Al-Azhar graduates from Southeast Asia who would later shape religious and political institutions in Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. The chapter highlights two to three personalities who had received their degrees from Al-Azhar, yet their religious orientation differs from one another. Also different were the roles they played upon their return to the region: most ended up as religious scholars (*ulama*), while others became politicians and activists. This shows that one cannot speak of a monolithic Al-Azhar "school of thought".

In Chapter 4, I analyse the learning experience of past and contemporary Singapore students of the university. I conducted in-depth interviews with a sample of graduates from the 1960s to the 2000s and interviewed students currently studying in the university. I have also conducted an online survey with thirty-seven students to understand their struggles in Al-Azhar.

Chapter 5 concludes with a summary of my preliminary findings on the religious experience of Al-Azhar students. The

data presented in this book may be useful for policymakers in relation to religious education in Singapore.

Notes

1. Under the Caliphate system, such as the Ottoman Empire (1299–1923), Muslims around the world paid tribute to the Caliph.
2. They do not use the label on any groups or individuals (e.g., Organization XYZ is an *ulama* organization, or person ABC is an *alim* (singular for *ulama*)).
3. Interview with Shamsiah, 2016.
4. Previously, this function was under the Mendaki Religious Advisory Committee. Mendaki is a Malay self-help group whose mainly responsibility is to raise the community's educational standards.

Chapter 2

THE AL-AZHAR UNIVERSITY
A Historical Sketch

The Al-Azhar University has significantly impacted Islamic education around the world. The university has been referred to as *Qiblatul 'ilm* (The Centre of Knowledge) because it offers a wide range of Islamic studies disciplines besides the study of the Quran and Hadith. The university offers *an-nahwu was sorf* (Arabic syntax and morphology), Arabic language, *mantiq* (logic), *aqidah* (belief), *fiqh* (jurisprudence), and *tassawuf* (Sufism).[1] Many Islamic universities or Islamic departments emulate Al-Azhar's curriculum. For example, the Faculty of Shariah of the University of Damascus in Syria follows the teaching methods of the Al-Azhar University. Similarly, universities in Sudan have their Islamic curriculum modelled after the Al-Azhar University. Graduates from Al-Azhar have also been invited to teach in Malaysian universities, particularly in the Islamic departments. These academics also helped kick-start these departments during their formative years (in the 1970s) in order to improve students' Arabic standards (Abaza 1994, p. 70). Many of the teachers lecturing at the Akademi Islam — today known as Islamic Studies Academy (Akademi Pengajian Islam, or API) — of the University of Malaya are

Al-Azhar graduates. Graduates from the Al-Azhar University have headed the Faculties of Shariah (Islamic Law) and Usuluddin (theology) in Malaysian universities.

HISTORY OF AL-AZHAR

The formation of the Al-Azhar University dated back to more than 1,000 years ago. It was formed during the Fatimid Caliphate (909–1171), a Shia-leaning government, in 972. The Fatimid Caliphate upheld the Shiite Ismailiyya school of thought. The rulers claimed to be descendants of Prophet Muhammad's daughter, Fatimah. Interestingly, even though the rulers were Shias, Egypt was (and still is) a Sunni-majority country. When the Fatimids conquered Egypt, they did not oppress the Sunnis, and they were allowed to practise their beliefs freely (Dodge 1961, p. 10).[2] Under the Fatimids, Jews, and Copts were also allowed to practise their faith without any oppression (Tignor 2010, p. 154). Al-Azhar was first constructed by a Fatimid general to serve as an "assembly mosque" for the masses. Al-Azhar was also a means to glorify the Caliphate, projecting its power and authority to its rival, mainly the Caliphs in Baghdad (modern-day Iraq) (Dodge 1961, pp. 1–2).

In 1171, the Ayubbi Sultanate replaced the Fatimids in Egypt, and Sunnism became the official sect of the country once again. The Ayyubi Dynasty was founded by the Muslim hero, Saladin (b. 1137 – d. 1193) or An-Nasir Salah ad-Din Yusuf ibn Ayyub, who led an expansionist journey to reconquer Palestine from the Crusades. By 1171, he was in control of Egypt and parts of North Africa. Saladin made the Shafie school of jurisprudence the code of the country, reversing the policies undertaken by the Fatimids. He also relocated the centre of his administration to Cairo (Tignor 2010, p. 162). Saladin also introduced a more centralized Islamic bureaucracy, forging unity in the fragmented Egyptian society.

Under his rule, Friday prayers were conducted in one mosque, as opposed to the common practice where the prayers were offered in many small mosques in towns or cities. This policy led to the closure of the mosque within the Al-Azhar compounds, which became a centre for informal religious learning and place for refugees, until several decades later (the time of al-Malik al-Zahir Baybars). The Friday prayers were held at the Mosque of al-Hakim, which could hold more congregants (Dodge 1961, pp. 35–36).

However, it was only under the rule on the Mamluks (1250–1517) that the Al-Azhar University became a recognizable institution of higher learning in the Islamic world. The Mamluks were generally Turkish speaking, and their command of Arabic was not outstanding, even though they were Muslims. Moreover, most of the ruling class came from military and cavalry units, and their primary concern was to ward off challenges from Crusaders and Mongols (Tignor 2010, p. 167). Al-Azhar served as an important centre of knowledge for the ruling class, with its scholars equipping Mamluk elites with lessons from the Quran and mastery of the Arabic language (Dodge 1961, pp. 55–75). Al-Azhar also served as the moral guardian of the wealthy rulers; its scholars constantly reminded the ruling elites of the need to live with humility and never to neglect the poor. In the early fifteenth century, the Mamluks conducted major restoration of the Al-Azhar. This is in line with the Mamluks' inclination to restore the architecture of important sites such as mosques and *madrasahs,* and to undertake the construction of massive buildings, a manifestation of their powers and wealth (Tignor, 2010, p. 169). For example, when the brick minaret of the mosque was unstable and leaned forward, the Sultan then, Al-Muáyyad Shaykh, carried out major restoration works. There was also a reconstruction of the dome to provide better drinking water for the poor (Dodge 1961, p. 69).

The University's standards improved further under the Ottoman Caliphate (1299–1922). The Ottomans, who began to expand their influence to Syria, Egypt and other holy sites in Hijaz (modern-day Saudi Arabia) between 1516 and 1517, glorified the status of the university as an institution of learning. The authority of the Al-Azhar remained intact in spite of a greater process of assimilation towards the dominant Turkish culture (Hatina 2010, p. 20). There was an influx of scholars from all over the Islamic world who came to study at the Al-Azhar.

In the seventh century, the Chair of Shaykh Al-Azhar was established. The Shaykh of Al-Azhar was elected by the committee of scholars in the university, though the Ottomans would have to give consent. The Shaykh had some degree of autonomy. Under the Ottoman Caliphate, there was little interference from Istanbul in the affairs of Al-Azhar. The Egyptian *ulama* held important positions in the university, including the position of Shaykh Al-Azhar (Rector). Since the Ottoman Empire follows the Hanafi School of jurisprudence, the Al-Azhar leadership was rotated between the Shafie and Maliki schools of law (Hatina 2010, pp. 20–21). The main duties of the Shaykh of Al-Azhar were to oversee the running of the Al-Azhar mosque and the administration of the Al-Azhar University. In today's context, the Shaykh is commonly addressed as the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar.[3] The position of the Shaykh of Al-Azhar has to be differentiated from the Grand Mufti of Egypt, which was a later development in Egyptian society. The Mufti functioned more as a jurist, though he and the Shaykh of Al-Azhar would be present at official functions representing the Islamic community.

COLONIALISM AND AL-AZHAR

The Al-Azhar University was able to withstand foreign influence and retained its purpose throughout European colonial rule.

Between 1798 and 1801, Egypt fell to French colonial rule, under the charge of the famous 28-year-old general, Napoleon Bonaparte. The French fleet included 400 vessels carrying 54,000 soldiers (Tignor 2010, p. 196). The French wanted control of Al-Azhar, but this move was rejected by the Al-Azhar clerics, who remained loyal to the Ottoman rulers. Occasionally, several riots took place in the Al-Azhar University, which the French quelled harshly (Hatina 2010, p. 27). Still, the French were unable to exercise their dominance over the institution.

The arrival of Muhammad Ali Pasha halted the French inroads into Egypt. The Ottomans sent him to fight the French and restore the authority of the Muslim Caliphate in Egypt. Ali's soldiers defeated the French, and he went on to become the Ottoman Governor of Egypt for four decades (1805–48). Istanbul did not officially approve Ali's authority in Egypt, but all attempts to remove him failed. Ali assumed the title of Khedive (Viceroy) — the first leader to use the title in Egypt which his successors continued — and he wielded significant power and autonomy in Egypt. Under his rule, there was greater centralization of authority. He spearheaded many reforms, including the taxation methods and revamping of the *waqf* lands by putting them under the central government. He also intruded into the internal affairs of the judiciary and Sufi orders. He went on to rebuild the Egyptian army, given his country's experience under French colonial rule. According to Hatina,

> Muhammad Ali focused on consolidating the power of the Egyptian state by developing its military and administrative systems; yet he also nibbled away at Al-Azhar's moral grip on society and its authority in the areas of education and religious law. He himself declared his loyalty to the ideal of unity between religion and state and was a patron of a group of senior "*ulama*" who lent legitimacy to his rule and policies. Senior "*ulama*" such

> as *naqib al-ashraf*, the head of the Sufi orders, and the Maliki and Hanafi muftis were co-opted as members of the advisory *diwan* that he established, headed by his son Ibrahim, and were present when regime edicts were announced. (Hatina 2010, pp. 29–30)

Al-Azhar's education was affected by Muhammad Ali's centralization and militarization of the state. Muhammad Ali instructed the university to focus on subjects that suit Egypt's militarization and emphasized less on intellectual rigour and religious content. There was more focus on the modern sciences rather than the religious sciences. Under his rule, Al-Azhar's leadership was centralized, consistent with other Islamic institutions or administrative departments in Egypt, since he took power. Muhammad Ali preferred to appoint the Shaykh of Al-Azhar who was attuned to his philosophy rather than those elected by Al-Azhar scholars themselves. The financial autonomy of the university and the Shaykh was undermined after the *waqf* institution was controlled by the government (Bayoumi 2010).

These modernization efforts, through the introduction of secular subjects in Al-Azhar, were continued by Khedive Ismail (b. 1830 – d. 1895) who ruled between 1863 and 1879. Ismail was eager to modernize the country so that it would be on par with European powers. Riding on the cotton boom, which brought huge revenues to his government, Ismail invested heavily on education. Under his watch, intellectuals such as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh (who later inspired the modernist movement which impacted Southeast Asia) emerged (Tignor 2010, p. 220). These modernization efforts did not satisfy everyone among the religious quarters. One of the most important personalities who led a revolt against such modernization efforts was Shaykh Muhammad Illaysh (1802–82), a Maliki mufti and graduate of Al-Azhar (who will be discussed shortly). Illaysh would also oppose the rule of Khedive Ismail's successor, Khedive Tawfiq.

In 1879, Egypt came under the rule of Khedive Tawfiq. He inherited the government of Khedive Ismail which had accumulated a huge financial debt. Ismail was so eager to expand Egypt's territory that he led to failed and costly military expeditions in Africa. The state's banks were in an abysmal situation that Khedive Ismail had to seek guidance from British and French advisers, also allowing them to control key ministries such as finance and public works (Tignor 2010, p. 225). What ensued later were a series of clashes between the Egyptian masses, especially the nationalists and foreigners in the country. For example, in June 1881, a Maltese sailor stabbed a donkey boy in Alexandria, and this incident resulted in tensions between the locals and Europeans which then extended to the rural parts of the country. Dozens of Europeans were killed during these clashes. It was reported that 14,000 Christians had to flee the country to escape the war between Egypt and Britain (Dodge 1961, p. 122). The British proceeded on their own war with Egypt because Istanbul and Paris decided not to join the war. The Europeans military superiority was clear during the war, and on 14 September 1882, the British occupied Cairo.

Consistent in the governing style towards its colonies, the British adopted indirect rule in Egypt. It carried out minimal reforms in Egypt, neglected the education of the masses, but paid closer attention to the administrative and economic aspects. The British had a negative perception towards the Muslims and Islam in general. The British Consul General in Egypt, Lord Cromer (1883–1906), was known to have a negative impression of Muslims. Typical of an Orientalist scholar, he dismissed Egyptian culture, worldview and religious beliefs as less civilized than the Europeans'. Cromer highlighted Islam's "intolerant, repressive, and hypocritical political and social system" (Hatina 2010, p. 131). Therefore, he did not allocate much budget for

the Al-Azhar administration because he did not see the value of Islamic education.

The negative perception of the British towards Muslims worsened with the Al-Azhar *ulama*'s siding with the Ottomans against the British. Between 1881 and 1882, the *ulama* in Egypt participated in the famous Urabi revolt against the Khedive (then Khedive Tawfiq). The movement started from an internal struggle within the military, but later expanded to become a mass movement, calling for "Egypt for Egyptians". Lord Cromer noted that the Al-Azhar clerics were supportive of the revolt. Even though the Khedive and the Urabi were pro-Ottoman, the *ulama* saw the Khedive as a traitor to fellow Egyptians when it sought British protection. The Urabi revolt later transpired into an anti-colonial movement directed towards the British.

MODERNISM IN AL-AZHAR IN THE LATE 1800s

In the 1870s, Al-Azhar witnessed several developments in terms of the way the university was run and how faculty members were recruited. These changes had to be evaluated in the light of weakening support of the masses towards the Khedive and interference from foreign powers which led to British colonialism in 1882. Some of the Al-Azhar *ulama* called for reforms, and in their writings, touched on issues concerning progress and modernization. Some of the thinkers during this period left a long-lasting legacy, and they impacted the modernist movement in the Muslim world to this day. In 1870, the university appointed Shaykh Muhammad al-Mahdi as the Rector, and he made significant changes that affected the quality of faculty recruitment. Lecturers who wanted to teach at the university had to undergo an examination. Certain kinds of robes also distinguished the ranks of the lecturers. The highest-ranking

lecturer (modern-day professor) would wear a special robe conferred by the ruler and could travel within Egypt freely (Dodge 1961, p. 117).

As mentioned earlier, during this period, Al-Azhar gave birth to progressive scholars, and one of them was Jamal al-Din al-Afghani. Known for his modernist and progressive views, the conservatives feared him because of his popularity and charisma. Students came to his home to listen to his fiery speeches and asked difficult questions. His views encouraged Muslims to rethink about traditions that passed down from generation to generation unthinkingly. He encouraged his students to re-evaluate traditions in the light of values the Quran propounded, such as equality, justice, fairness, freedom and brotherhood. He also encouraged his students to adopt an all-embracing approach towards modern sciences. According to Gesink,

> Al-Afghani taught that cultural revival required scientific and political revival. The first step would be for Muslims to understand their religion correctly and live according to its teachings. The Quran commanded Muslims to seek evidence for their beliefs and avoid accepting others' beliefs uncritically. This required a spirit of inquiry. (Gesink 2009, p. 72)

Al-Afghani also mentioned that the gates of *ijtihad* had not closed. He urged Muslims to interpret and reinterpret religious texts in the light of the modern world.

Political instability that led to British occupation had encouraged prominent Egyptian scholars to reform their society. Al-Afghani produced many disciples along the way. One of his most distinguished students was Muhammad Abduh, who was generally critical of the outmoded learning in the university. Abduh was active in his youth days in writing, and he published many critical pieces. Unsurprisingly, he did not draw many likes

from his contemporaries; some of whom referred to him and the other Al-Afghani's students as heretics. Between 1880 and 1882, Abduh was the editor-in-chief of *al-Waqaí al-misriyya*, a government-owned publication. It was through his leadership of this journal that he began to censor articles not in line with progressive objectives and wrote about educational reforms in the country (Gesink 2009, pp. 78–79). Abduh was critical of Al-Azhar's mode of learning and the subjects he studied.

In 1895, Khedive Abbas Hilmi II appointed Abduh with powers to oversee the administration of the Al-Azhar University. In 1899, Abduh became the Grand Mufti of Egypt. As will be discussed in Chapter 3, Abduh's thinking influenced modernist thinkers in Southeast Asia, who by the early twentieth century were also studying in Al-Azhar, or having some contact with his students, or referring to his works.

Al-Afghani's and Abduh's reformist zeal was not met without challengers. The crux of Al-Afghani's reform movement was to question blind faith. Yet, the followers of *taqlid* (traditionalists not open to independent reasoning on theological matters), who followed closely established different schools of jurisprudence, also wrote in defence of their cause. One other prominent Al-Azhar scholar who defended traditionalism is Muhammad Illaysh mentioned earlier. Although not often spoken about (emphasis has always been on Abduh and the modernist movement), Illaysh was a very popular figure in Egyptian society and commanded respect not only for his knowledge on Islam but also his personal piety. He was strongly opposed to foreign influence in the country. His lectures in Al-Azhar would normally attract 200 students (Gesink 2009, pp. 90–91). So influential was Illaysh that he was appointed as the Grand Shaykh of Al-Azhar. Illaysh continued to be a prominent figure who represented a counter-discourse to modernism; although he was not anti-reforms, he was pro-

taqlid. In other words, the reform movement in Al-Azhar is not a homogeneous group.

FROM COLONIALISM TO NATIONALISM

In 1914, the British ended the Khedivate system and reinstalled the Sultanate system. Egypt was to be ruled by descendants of Muhammad Ali Pasha. British rule in Egypt lasted throughout the two world wars. It consolidated its rule in the Middle East after the First World War (1914–18), at about the same time the Ottoman Empire fell. In 1922, the British terminated Egypt's protectorate status and the country was to be ruled by two successive monarchs: Ahmed Fuad I (1922–36) and Farouk I (1936–52). The British grip in Egypt weakened after the Second World War (1939–45). It suffered heavy losses during the war which eventually led to its declining empire and decolonization of its territories in the Middle East and Asia. Its decline in the Middle East coincided with growing nationalism among Arab states.

In 1952, Gamal Abdul Nasser (r.1952–70) rose to power as the new president arising from a military coup. Nasser famously called for Arab unity against Western colonialism. He led the Egyptian revolution which deposed the monarchy and ended the British control of the state. The revolution deposed King Farouk I, and he was sent to exile. Technically, his son, Ahmed Fuad II would take over his reign. However, as Ahmed was an infant (less than 1 year old) when he was made the King, he was never formally crowned and never exercised real power. This meant a formal end to Egypt's monarchical system.

During this period, Egypt also witnessed the rise of the Islamist ideology from the Muslim Brotherhood (*Ikhwanul Muslimin*) organization. As soon as he assumed power, Nasser began to assert more control over the running and administration of the

Al-Azhar University, especially between 1954 and 1970 (Steven 1998, p. 236). Commentators described Al-Azhar as the tool of the government. The university was shaped by the nationalist rhetoric, particularly to quell Islamist ideas. The following three examples showcase how Al-Azhar was influenced by Nasser's regime: first, in 1956, Al-Azhar did not protest when the Islamic family law was incorporated into the civil law; in 1961, Al-Azhar began to host many secular faculties apart from the Islamic ones; and it also lost the authority to appoint the Shaykh of Al-Azhar and allowed the government the prerogative to appoint the number one position in the university (Steven 1998, p. 238). But the event that took the toll on Al-Azhar's image was the fact that it remained silent when Egypt established diplomatic ties with Israel during the 1978–79 Camp David Accords, contradicting its *fatwa* in 1956, which rejected any form of peace agreements with the Jewish state.

This one-sided relationship between the Egyptian government and Al-Azhar continued under the Muhammad Anwar Sadat regime (1970–81), but went off to a different course under the Hosni Mubarak regime (1981–2011). While Al-Azhar continued to support the Mubarak regime, it made inroads in getting the president to accede to several requests. Al-Azhar scholars saw the advantages of being loyal to the ruling regime, and the president returned this favour by giving them greater control on Islamic matters. For example, under the Shaykh Jad Al Haq, the Grand Imam of the university between 1982 and 1996, Al-Azhar demanded that the university be given a free hand to handle religious matters. It then used the little autonomy it had to become a power broker in the Egyptian public sphere. It wanted to be accorded the authority to define the correct interpretation of Islam. It also placed itself at the centre stage of the dispute between the Muslim Brotherhood and the government. In events

when Islamist groups criticize the government, the latter would be on the defensive and would leave the authority to Al-Azhar *ulama* to criticize the Islamists. These were the moments in which the Al-Azhar *ulama* then reasserted their authority in the religious sphere (Steven 1998, p. 240).

Hosni Mubarak stayed in power for three decades until the Arab Spring happened in 2011. Thousands demonstrated on the streets of Cairo and Tahrir Square calling for Mubarak's resignation. Similar demonstrations in Tunisia and Libya, which led to the downfall of these countries' authoritarian governments, inspired the Egyptian demonstrators to end Mubarak's authoritarian rule. Mubarak eventually stepped down.

Despite the country being in constant political turmoil, it was business as usual for the Al-Azhar University. Nonetheless, Singapore students there have expressed their worry as events unfolded. According to a Singapore student, Luqman Hakim,

> Perhaps another disadvantage for those of us in Egypt is the need to be prepared for the worst. 2011 was a good example when the Arab Spring revolt started to turn for the worse, and Singapore students had to return home. Of course, I hope that nothing bad happens but we need to keep this in mind when staying in a place that is still trying to get a grip on itself.[4]

Some students contemplated whether to quit Al-Azhar or suspend their studies when Egypt was facing the Arab Spring protests. Most of the students, nonetheless, stayed on and completed their studies in the university, despite the risks.[5]

Al-Azhar continues to be the destination for students of religious studies despite the Middle East being in turmoil in post-World War II. Since the 1950s, it has been under the military dictatorships of Gamal Abdel Nasser, Muhammad Anwar Sadat, Hosni Mubarak, and currently, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi (2013–present).

Egypt was briefly under democratic rule under President Mohamed Morsi (June 2012–July 2013), resulting from the Arab Spring in 2011. The uprising saw the toppling of dictators in Tunisia and Egypt. Although Morsi won through democratic elections, he too was criticized for introducing an Islamist form of government when in power, which came as no surprise, given his links to the Muslim Brotherhood movement.

MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD

Leaving the historical evolution of the Al-Azhar University for a moment, one organization which should be highlighted when speaking about Islamization in Egypt is the Muslim Brotherhood (*Ikhwanul Muslimin*). The organization had its roots in the 1928 and was founded by Hassan al-Banna (1906–49). The movement grew from strength to strength, even though it started off as a mission to spread the message of Islam. It began to mobilize support from mosque congregants as well as students from the Al-Azhar University. The movement later influenced many other important figures in the Islamic world, such as Syed Qutb and Abu Ala Al-Mawdudi, whose writings are referred to by the Muslim radicals (Riduan 2015).

The Muslim Brotherhood was never a homogeneous group because there are many variants of it. The groups were divided into the extremists, conservatives, progressives and radicals. Ultimately, the thinking of the organization's members was also shaped by the political conditions of the time. They were poised to restore the dignity of the Islamic world after the fall of the Ottoman Empire in the 1920s (after the First World War). During this period, there was a so-called leadership tussle between Saudi Arabia and the Egypt on which nation should lead the Muslim world after the Ottomans crumbled. The Muslim Brotherhood felt that the Muslim world had to return to Islamic tenets. In 1949,

the Muslim Brotherhood lost their ideologue al-Banna who was assassinated. Fingers were immediately pointed to King Farouk and his military, who were accused to be behind the murder.

In the 1950s, the movement saw the rise of another prominent leader, Syed Qutb. Even though he had previously stayed in America, Qutb had anti-Western values. By this time, President Nasser was already in power. Initially, Qutb was in support of Nasser's military government plotting the overthrow of the monarchy. The Muslim Brotherhood's support for the Nasser regime fell short after the latter refused to form an Islamic state, which was one of the many wishes of the organization. In 1954, the government uncovered a secret plot to assassinate the president, and Qutb was accused to be behind it. Consequently, Qutb was sent to prison. He was released briefly in 1964, but was rearrested again shortly. He was once again accused of wanting to overthrow the government and was sentenced to death by hanging as a result. The Muslim Brotherhood movement went underground after the serious state clampdown.

Given the uncertainty of the political situation then, and with accusations of coups being plotted, President Nasser decided to clamp down on political dissent. Feeling the heat of the curbs were the religious elites. The authority of the Grand Shaykh of Al-Azhar was further curbed. In 1961, the president introduced a law that gave the authorities absolute powers to appoint the highest religious authority in the university. According to Bayoumi,

> In the past four decades [since the 1960s], the powers of Al-Azhar have been divided between three governments institutions: A Wakf ministry that controls the religious trusts, for the financial resources needed to secure Al-Azhar's economic independence; a Mufti institution that is part of Egypt's ministry of justice; and Al-Azhar which was downgraded to an educational institution controlled by a shaykh selected by the government. (Bayoumi 2010)

AL-QARADAWI AND AL-AZHAR

One prominent figure from the Muslim Brotherhood movement, having significant following in Southeast Asia, is Yusuf al-Qaradawi. He was the crucial link between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Al-Azhar University. As a student of theology in 1946, he formed the Muslim Brotherhood branch in the university (Graf and Skovgaard-Petersen 2009, p. 2). He spent more time with the organization than studying at the Al-Azhar itself. In 1947, he was arrested and imprisoned for his activities. In 1954, together with Qutb, he was arrested for a failed assassination attempt. However, he was released in 1956 and continued to work as a teacher in the Institute of Islamic Culture of Al-Azhar. In 1961, he moved to Qatar as an Al-Azhar emissary to the new state. In the 1970s, under the rule of Anwar Sadat, al-Qaradawi was allowed to return to Egypt. He defended the thesis he wrote in 1973 at the Al-Azhar on taxation. To this day, al-Qaradawi remains an ideologue within the Muslim Brotherhood, and he constantly prides himself as an Al-Azhar alumni. This contributes to his mixed identity as a preacher and a scholar (Skovgaard-Petersen 2009, p. 36).

Even though al-Qaradawi lived most part of his life in self-exile in Qatar, his links with the Al-Azhar University remain strong. In 1978, he penned his views in a special issue of the magazine *Majallat Al-Azhar*, which celebrated the millennium of the university. He took the opportunity to repeat his call, made earlier in the 1950s, for reforms in the university. He stressed that Islamic Renaissance must come from Al-Azhar. He pointed out two reasons for the university's decline: the policies undertaken by the ruling elites (particularly under the rule of Muhammad Ali) and also the lack of reformist zeal among Al-Azhar professors (Skovgaard-Petersen 2009, pp. 40–41).

Al-Qaradawi has worldwide following to this day, and some contemporary Muslims consider him a great *mujtahid* (a religious scholar who exercises independent reasoning and memorizes the Quran). He made his name mostly in Qatar. He was a teacher at the Qatar University and was also an *imam* (prayer leader) of the Umar Ibn Khattab Mosque in Doha, leading prayers during Ramadhan (the month in which Muslims are obligated to fast) and Friday sermons.

He also commands media presence, facilitated by the Qatar government and the country's Al-Jazeera channel. His popularity increased because of the television programme *Sharia and Life*, *al-Syaria wa I-hayat*, in which he was able to respond directly to any queries on religious matters posed by the audience. His reach to the masses through the television programme was more than 35 million (Skovgaard-Petersen 2009).

Besides media presence, al-Qaradawi's books and articles were well received and translated into many languages, including in Malay and English. One particular book in which al-Qaradawi was famous for is *Al-Halal Wal Haram Fil Islam* (*The Lawful and the Prohibited in Islam*), orginally published in Arabic in 1960, in which he addressed the concerns of Muslim daily life, be they on faith, rituals or practices. The book also touches on topics dealing with Muslims' relationship with non-Muslims and business transactions. According to al-Qaradawi, the General Institute of Islamic Culture of Al-Azhar commissioned him to introduce Islamic teachings to Europe and America, which was the reason why he undertook the project (al-Qaradawi 1994, p. 1). Moreover, the Muslim world saw al-Qaradawi as defending the faith against external threats: he condemned the Danish cartoons and issued a *fatwa* allowing suicide attacks in Palestine against the Israeli civilians among others.

Having made to live in Qatar for decades, al-Qaradawi was frustrated with Egypt, particularly how the Al-Azhar University is run. He called for stricter criteria for employing university professors, making it obligatory for all women teachers to put on the veil and restructuring the curriculum to include Western sciences with Islamic perspectives (Skovgaard-Petersen 2009, pp. 42–43). His call for stricter qualifications for Al-Azhar academics later played out in the tensions between him and the Grand Shaykh of Al-Azhar, Shaykh Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi (1996–2010). Al-Qaradawi was a firm believer that the position of the Grand Shaykh must be decided by the religious scholars themselves and not appointed by the state. Tantawi was the Grand Shaykh of Al-Azhar during the rule of Dictator Hosni Mubarak. Al-Qaradawi pointed out that Tantawi was not qualified to issue religious rulings or *fatwa* because Tantawi was trained as a Professor of Quranic interpretation, not jurist (Bayoumi 2010).

Al-Azhar's evolution is closely linked to the Egyptian history. The university has always taught the Sunni school of thought, even though it was founded under a Shia Caliphate. Throughout its history, the university adopted both the traditional teaching method called the *halaqah* system and the modern teaching methods, such as the lecture system. Politics also shaped the university hierarchy, and its independence depended on who is in power. To be sure, politicians — whether the monarchy, the British colonial government and the several military dictatorships — wanted to have a stake in determining how the university was run. They understood the university's capacity in mobilizing the masses and hence wanted to ensure the university academics toed the government's line.

Religious and political development in Egypt in the late nineteenth to the twentieth century had a significant impact on the religious discourse in the Malay world via the regions'

link with the Al-Azhar University. For example, the Malay world witnessed the arrival of modernist thinking, which sought to reform the religious life of the Malays. These modernists were inspired by similar movement in Egypt, led by Al-Azhar Mufti, Muhammad Abduh. Besides modernism, the Malay world also absorbed the influence of conservatives and utopian groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood. The impact of the Muslim Brotherhood in the region reached the apex in the 1970s and 1980s. The organization's ideologue, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, also had significant following in the region. His works are widely read, and he had shaped Islamization, in Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore.

Notes

1. Interview with Abdullah, third-year Al-Azhar student, 2017.
2. The fundamental disagreement between the Sunnis and Shias is who should succeed Prophet Muhammad when he passed away in AD 632. The Sunnis believed it should be his companion, Abu Bakar, while the Shias believed that Ali Abu Talib, the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, should succeed him because he had the closest blood ties with the Prophet. The Sunnis, however, also revered Ali and considered him as the fourth rightly guarded caliph after Abu Bakar As-Sidique, Umar Al-Khattab and Usman Affan.
3. Under British rule (discussed later), the position of the Grand Mufti of Egypt was created in the 1900s (Bayoumi 2010). The Grand Mufti, on the other hand, took some of the powers of the Shaykh of Al-Azhar and functioned as the jurist.
4. Interview with Luqman Hakim, an Al-Azhar student, 2016.
5. *Berita Harian*, "Cekal hati tuntut ilmu di tengah pergolakan prodemokrasi di Mesir", 29 January 2016.

Chapter 3

PROMINENT SOUTHEAST ASIAN AL-AZHAR GRADUATES

In the early twentieth century, Singapore was a hub for intellectual exchanges. Modernist ideas from Egypt, particularly transmitted from the likes of Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida, made their way to Southeast Asia via Singapore. One of the key modernist thinkers who was then living in Singapore was Syed Shaikh al-Hadi. Inspired by the modernist movement in Egypt, al-Hadi became active through the magazine *al-Imam* (the leader), which drew inspiration from the Egyptian *al-Manar* (the Beacon). *Al-Imam* promoted ideas critical of the traditional religious establishment. Pieces from *al-Manar* were also translated into *al-Imam*, and the slant and angle also followed the Egyptian journal. Al-Hadi travelled widely during his younger days. When he went to perform the haj, he took the opportunity to study under many *ulama* in Mecca and Egypt, and among those whom he studied under was Abduh. He was particularly interested in Abduh's reformist ideas and wanted to apply them to Singapore's context (Firdaus, Wan Hussein and Mohd Raman 2010, pp. 25–26).

Southeast Asian students studying at the Al-Azhar University also grew in numbers by the 1920s. They began to organize

themselves based on common language, culture and homeland. In October 1925, Indonesian and Malay students in Cairo established the periodical *Seruan Azhar* (The Call of Al-Azhar) (Roff 1970).[1] One of those who was active in running the journal was Ahmad' Atta Allah Suhaimi. His brother, Muhammad Fadhlullah Suhaimi, was also a student at the Al-Azhar University between 1911 and 1916. Muhammad Fadhlullah struggled for women's equal access to education. In 1936, Muhammad Fadhlullah set up a *madrasah* for girls, called Madrasah Al-Maarif (Firdaus, Wan Hussein and Mohd Raman 2011, pp. 42–43). Al-Hadi and Muhammad Fadhlullah are examples showing how the Al-Azhar University impacted the Singapore religious discourse in a positive way in the early twentieth century.

By the early twentieth century, Singapore also became the centre for Islamic learning for the region. One school that attracted students pursuing religion is Madrasah Aljunied Al-Islamiah, which was established in 1927. The school attracted students from Brunei and Malaya. For example, Bruneian Mohamad Zain Serudin was a graduate of the school and later became the Mufti of Brunei. The school continues to function as the premier institute of religious learning in Singapore, although Malaysians and Bruneians no longer send their children there. Still, the *madrasah* prepares most of its students to study at the Al-Azhar University.

Even though this monograph examines Al-Azhar students from Singapore, this chapter examines the lives of prominent Southeast Asian *ulama* who completed their degrees in the Al-Azhar University. This is intended to give a full picture of the diverse group of Al-Azhar graduates. Singapore achieved independence in 1965, and for the most part of its modern history, it was part of Malaysia (then Malaya). Students from Singapore studying in Al-Azhar pre-dates 1965 (example of Muhammad Fadhlullah mentioned earlier), but there was little information about them

and the exact number of students who studied in Cairo. Thus, to showcase this diversity, this chapter includes prominent Al-Azhar students from Indonesia and Malaysia. The inclusion of these two countries is by no means diverting our focus from Singapore. The writings and sermons of the Malaysian and Indonesian Al-Azhar graduates analysed are followed by Singaporean Muslims. Some of these graduates form associations across these three countries (to be sure, the boundary which segregates the three countries is a colonial construct cemented post–World War II).

There are thousands of Al-Azhar graduates in the region, but I will only highlight prominent ones. They occupy (or have occupied) important positions in their societies. The purpose of highlighting the personalities in the following sections is to point out the different trajectories they led upon graduation. Some worked closely with the state, while others remained independent from it. The selection of graduates here also shows how the outcome of their religious training at Al-Azhar varies. In other words, there is no specific school of thought from Al-Azhar, despite the notion that Al-Azhar teaches moderation or *wasatiyyah*. What explains the various learning outcomes shall be explored in Chapter 4. The following text highlights several prominent Al-Azhar graduates from Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. Comparatively, the number of graduates from Indonesia is more than that from Malaysia and Singapore.

PROMINENT AL-AZHAR AFFILIATES FROM INDONESIA

It is impossible to profile all Indonesian graduates who had studied in the Al-Azhar University. Abaza's (1994) work highlights some of the prominent Al-Azhar graduates from the country and how they later contributed to its intellectual discourse. Some of them

studied in Al-Azhar formally, while others had close contacts with the scholars and students in the university and studied religion in informal settings. There were also cases of students who enrolled in Al-Azhar but later moved to either the Cairo University or elsewhere outside Egypt, because they were not satisfied with the state of Islamic learning offered by Al-Azhar.

In the early twentieth century, Indonesian alumni such as Raden Fathu-l Rahman Kafrawi and Djanan Tayeb established contacts with the reformist scholars in Al-Azhar and became activists in their society upon returning home. They pioneered *Seruan Azhar*, a reformist-oriented magazine in Indonesia. Raden later joined the Masjumi Party (an Islamist political party from during the Japanese occupation in 1943) but subsequently moved to the civil service, at the Ministry of Religion. Another Indonesian intellectual who studied in Al-Azhar was Harun Nasution, a well-known modernist scholar. He wrote extensively on philosophy and theology, and became the rector of the Islamic University of Indonesia. He enrolled into Al-Azhar in 1939 and obtained a degree within a year. He then registered for a degree in theology, but when World War II broke out and he faced financial difficulties during his third year, he enrolled into the American University of Cairo (Abaza 1994, pp. 79–81). Harun then returned to his country and became one of the most influential Islamic thinkers.

One more contemporary Indonesian *alim* and public intellectual who studied in Al-Azhar is Abdurrahman Wahid, or Gus Dur. He is the son of Wahid Hasyim, a former Minister for Religion in Indonesia. Abdurrahman is also the grandson of Hasyim Ashaari, the founder of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU or Revival of Ulama) which is the largest Islamic organization in Indonesia. Abdurrahman himself was the Chairman of NU in the 1980s and 1990s, and later became the President of the Republic of Indonesia between 1999 and 2001. He, however, became disillusioned

with Al-Azhar and felt he did not like the education structure (Barton 2002). He did not complete his studies in Al-Azhar. He acknowledged that he improved his Arabic while studying in Cairo (Abaza 1994, p. 87).

There are many more students who enrolled into Al-Azhar and rose to prominence in Indonesia, but I shall highlight two more examples: Professor Hamka and Professor Quraish Shihab.

Haji Abdul Malik Karim Amrullah or Hamka (b.1917 – d.1981)

One Indonesian scholar who was strongly linked to the Al-Azhar University is Haji Abdul Malik Karim Amrullah, or better known by his acronym Hamka (Abaza 1994). He did not study in Al-Azhar formally, but was the first Indonesian to be given an Honorary Doctorate by the university. Hamka is a well-known Indonesian *alim* who had written *Tafsir Al-Azhar*, a translation of the thirty chapters of the Quran. Hamka was born on 17 February 1908 in Sumatra and received his early religious training from his father. He was later sent to a village school (Ahmad and Thalhah 2005, p. 26). Hamka had the opportunity to meet important Islamic thinkers from Indonesia and familiarized himself with many Western ideologies including socialism. He also had the opportunity to meet Ki Bagus Hadikusumo and HOS Cokroaminoto, well-known Indonesian intellectuals of his generation. He was also active in Muhammadiyah organization, especially the Padang Sumatra branch. The Muhammadiyah was founded in 1912 in Yogjakarta, by Kyai Ahmad Dahlan, who came back from the Middle East and sparked renewal in Indonesia. He was determined to erase mysticism and Islamic innovations from Indonesian Islam while embedding scientific knowledge and rationalism in the study of Islam. Hamka shared many of Ahmad Dahlan's reformist zeal.

Hamka conducted classes at a mosque near his home. Interestingly, the mosque is given the name Masjid Al-Azhar (Al-Azhar Mosque). In 1958, Hamka was invited to speak in Lahore and Cairo (Ahmad and Thalhah 2005, p. 28). At Al-Azhar, he delivered a lecture entitled "The influence of Muhammad Abduh in Indonesia" (Yunan 2003, p. 53). He then travelled to Saudi Arabia at the invitation of the Saudi King. While in Saudi Arabia, Hamka received news from Al-Azhar that he will be awarded the title *Honoris Causa* from the university. Al-Azhar honoured Hamka for his active involvement in writing and religious renewal in Indonesia. He basically continued his father's struggle in the modernist movement and is identified as one of the key thinkers of the Muhammadiyah movement. His father, Haji Abdul Karim Amrullah (also known as Haji Rasol), was deeply involved in the reformist movement in Minangkabau. Abdul Karim Amrullah was a key leader in the *Kaum Muda* (modernist) movement that struggled to cleanse Indonesian Islam from innovations. He was part of the trio that actively spread modernist ideas in Minangkabau; the other two being Sheikh Muhammad Djamil Djambek and Haji Abdullah Ahmad (Yunan 2003, pp. 34–35).

In the early 1960s, Hamka's activities were closely watched by the communists, who were forging closer ties with President Sukarno. They were also unhappy with Hamka's involvement in *Panji Masyarakat*, which the communists accused of trying to revive Masjumi's ideas that were Islamist in nature. During this period, Hamka was already appointed as the imam of Masjid Al-Azhar (in Indonesia). President Sukarno sent Hamka to house arrest, considering him a security threat to the regime. Instead, Hamka used his isolation to write the famous *Tafsir Al-Azhar*.

On 21 January 1966, after the fall of Sukarno, Hamka was released from confinement. Relation with the new President Suharto was cordial, as the president himself was raised as a

Muhammadiyah. In 1975, Suharto appointed Hamka as the first Chairman of the Ulama Council of Indonesia (Majelis Ulama Indonesia, or MUI). The council serves as a nationwide *ulama* body which united other Islamic organizations, particularly Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah. Even though there is no position of a Mufti in Indonesia, Hamka became the highest religious authority in the country, and the organization's role was mainly to issue *fatwas* or religious rulings.

The life story of Hamka is interesting for one to understand the relationship between Southeast Asia and the Al-Azhar University. Hamka did not obtain any degree from the university, and he studied under his father most of the time. Yet, he was active in writing. Hamka wrote not only religious books but also literary works, such as *Di Bawah Lindungan Kaabah* (Under the Protection of the Kaaba) and *Tenggelamnya Kapal Van Der Wick* (The Sinking of the Van Der Wick Ship).

Professor M. Quraish Shihab (b.1944)

Unlike Hamka, who obtained an Honorary Doctorate from the university but was not formally trained there, one prominent *alim* from Indonesia who underwent the full Al-Azhar training is Professor Quraish Shihab. He was born into an illustrious family of *ulama*, and his brothers were also active in the religious scene in contemporary Indonesia. Quraish has written many books, particularly in the field of exegesis. Quraish also hosts a television segment which focuses on the meanings of the Quran.

Quraish was born on 16 February 1944, in a small village Lotassalo, South Sulawesi. His father was also a famous Quranic exegete, Abrurahman Shihab. Quraish received his early religious training from the *pesantrens* (Islamic boarding school). In 1958, at the age of fourteen, Quraish went to the Al-Azhar University

to attend a preparatory course (Tsanawiyah) at the university (Mauluddin, Latief and Hadi 2015, pp. xxii–xxiv). Such courses were necessary for Southeast Asian students in order to improve their Arabic and also to familiarize themselves with the learning culture in Egypt. In 1961, Quraish obtained his master's degree. He returned to Egypt in 1980 to pursue his PhD. He completed his PhD within two years, and was one of the earliest Southeast Asian to obtain the title from Al-Azhar. Many Al-Azhar graduates relate how difficult it was to even pass the master's degree because of stringent requirements. Students are required to memorize the entire Quran and would have to pass all courses in a semester — failing one would necessitate repeating all the subjects. But Quraish was an exceptional student.

Quraish wrote an MA thesis dealing with the Quran, entitled "Al-I'jaz at-Tasryii li al-Quran al-Karim" (The Wonders of Al-Quran in accordance to Law). His PhD thesis is entitled "Nazm ad-Durar li al-Biqaí Tahqiq wa Dirasah", which is a study of a classical work by al-Biqa'I (Mauluddin, Latief and Hadi 2015, pp. 70–75). Upon his return to Indonesia, Quraish served as the rector for the UIN Syarif Hidayatullah in Jakarta, Indonesia's premier Islamic university. During the final months of the Suharto regime (1966–98), Quraish served as the Minister for Religion. After stepping down as Cabinet Minister, he assumed the role of Indonesia's Ambassador to Egypt.

Quraish is a very serious academic and authored many books, including his classic *Tafsir Al Misbah* on thirty chapters of the Quranic translation. He has also invited controversy through his works and sermons. Often, he is labelled by conservative critics as "liberal" and some even declared him a "deviant". He has written works that requested the Shias and Sunnis to work together. He has also given an alternative view about the wearing of headscarves by women, saying that the way Indonesians

understand it is not necessarily found in Islamic traditions. He remains a respectable scholar in the region and is often invited to give talks in Singapore. Quraish also acts as a bridge between Al-Azhar and Indonesian students, and a source of inspiration for those who wish to pursue their degrees in Egypt.

Upon his retirement from academia and politics, Quraish set up his own Quranic centre, Pusat Studi Quran (PSQ). He is also the Chairman of the Al-Azhar and Indonesian network, Ikatan Umum Alumni Al-Azhar. Quraish has said that he understood Islam's true message by studying from scholars from the university. Often, he was asked for his liberal and tolerant views, and he mentioned that his stint in Al-Azhar shaped his views. Quraish urged Indonesians to learn from Al-Azhar's message of tolerance and peace. During the visit of Al-Azhar's Grand Shaykh, he also urged Indonesians to learn from the university's tolerant views (Achmad 2016).

PROMINENT MALAYSIAN GRADUATES OF AL-AZHAR

Malaysian Al-Azhar graduates, too, have made significant contributions to the country's religious scene. They occupy important decision-making positions and the religious bureaucracy. Some are also active in politics, being members of the ruling party United Malays National Organization (UMNO) and the opposition Islamic party, Parti Islam Se Malaysia (PAS, or Pan Malaysian Islamic Party). A number of them are also active in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as the Ulama Association of Malaysia (PUM). Malaysian Al-Azhar graduates also teach in universities and most function as religious teachers.

Some of the Al-Azhar graduates occupy the highest religious authority of Malaysian states after the Malay Rulers. They were

appointed as state Muftis. In Malaysia, Islam is the religion of the federation. The country is made up of thirteen states and three Federal Territories. Nine of the states are headed by traditional Malay Rulers. According to the Constitution, Islam is a matter of the state, and the Rulers act as custodians of Islam and Malay culture. The Rulers have the authority to appoint members of the Islamic religious councils and key appointments in Islamic bureaucracies. Despite this authority, the state governments have the right to recommend names to the rulers. There are fourteen Muftis in Malaysia, one for each state and another for the Federal Territories. For states that do not have a Ruler, Islam falls under the jurisdiction of the Malaysian King (Yang Di-pertuan Agong), a position which is rotated among the nine Rulers every five years.

Even though Islam is a state matter, there are also Islamic institutions formed at the federal level as part of Islamic administration. These institutions' primary role is to facilitate interactions between various state Islamic bureaucracies. One such federal institution is the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM). JAKIM is headed by a Director who oversees the administration of the department, and he mainly answers to the Prime Minister's office. JAKIM also hosts the National Fatwa Committee (or JKF-MKI). Uniquely in Malaysia, a *fatwa* (ruling) that is issued by a state Mufti, and published in the state's gazette, can be enforced as a law. However, a *fatwa* issued by the JKF-MKI is not enforceable, unless it is published in the respective states' gazette. The JKF-MKI is made up all fourteen Malaysian Muftis, and a number of independent *ulama*, academics and religious practitioners. The JKF-MKI answers to the Council of Rulers, a body made up of all the nine Malay Rulers of the state.

Given its set-up at the federal and state levels, Malaysia has a complex religious bureaucracy. This complexity, nevertheless,

presents many career opportunities for religious studies graduates including those from the Al-Azhar University. The bureaucracy is seen as one of the many career options by those trained in the religious sciences. As mentioned, they may choose private practice, join politics, or serve in the NGOs. In the following, I discuss three Al-Azhar graduates who fulfil different positions in society: they are Hamid Othman, the former minister in the Prime Minister's office; Nik Aziz Nik Mat, the former Chief Minister of Kelantan and spiritual leader for PAS; and Abdul Shukor Husin, the Chairman of the JKF-MKI.

Tan Sri Abdul Hamid Othman (b.1939 – d.2011)

Unlike in some contemporary majority-Muslim states, Malaysia does not have a religious minister. Nevertheless, it has a minister appointed within the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) who oversees religious matters. He is normally a member of the ruling party UMNO. Under the Mahathir administration (1981–2003) and Abdullah Badawi administration (2003–09), Abdul Hamid Othman, an Al-Azhar graduate, was appointed into several portfolios in the Cabinet. In 1995, he was appointed as the Minister in the PMO in charge of Muslim Affairs. In 2001, Prime Minister Mahathir appointed him as his religious adviser with the status of a minister. He held the same position from 2005 to 2009 under the Abdullah Badawi's government before retiring from politics.

Abdul Hamid received his early religious education from local religious schools in the country, including Madrasah Idrisiah located in Kuala Kangsar. From 1959 to 1962, he enrolled into the Klang Islamic college and passed his Higher Religious Certificate and Diploma in Education. In 1961, he began studying Islamic law at the Al-Azhar University under a government scholarship. He was the only one among four students to obtain the scholarship

to pursue his studies in Cairo. Later, he continued with his PhD degree from St Andrews University, Scotland. Abdul Hamid was an active UMNO member and won the seat in the 1980 general election. He later rose to become a member of the UMNO Supreme Council, the highest decision-making body in the party. For his service to the nation, he was conferred the title of Tan Sri.

Abdul Hamid's career path had some similarities and differences from the likes of Hamka and Quraish Shihab in Indonesia. Both Hamka and Quraish participated in state institutions, and Quraish was made a minister. Nevertheless, Abdul Hamid was a true-blue bureaucrat and less of a scholar. He did not produce any distinctive scholarly legacy unlike Hamka and Quraish, who published thirty volumes of Quranic exegesis. In fact, Abdul Hamid was active in party politics and participated in general elections.

Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat (b.1931 – d.2015)

Returning Al-Azhar graduates to Malaysia do not necessarily serve only in government bodies or state religious bureaucracies, they also join NGOs and political parties. One renowned Al-Azhar graduate who later became a key member of the opposition is Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat. Born in 1931 into a family of great religious scholars, Nik Aziz received his early religious education from his father, who was also an *alim*. He then attended local religious schools and enrolled into the *madrasah* and *pondok* system before studying at the Darul Ulum Deoband School in India. He later went to Lahore (Pakistan) to study *tafsir*, before heading to Al-Azhar to study Islamic law (*shariah*).

In the 1980s, Nik Aziz rose to prominence in PAS. The party underwent a revival, placing the religious elites in control, and Nik Aziz benefitted from this revival. PAS lost support by joining the ruling coalition Barisan Nasional (BN, or National Front) between 1974 and 1978. Its reputation as an Islamic party increased in the

eyes of the conservative electorate after the party left the ruling coalition and removed the nationalists within it. During the 1990 elections, PAS did well and gained control of Kelantan, a generally rural and conservative state. Nik Aziz became the Chief Minister of Kelantan, and he stayed on as the Chief Minister until 2013. Nik Aziz was also the *murshidul am* (Spiritual Guide) of the party, making him the most revered person in the party, more than the party president.

By and large, Nik Aziz was a conservative and an Islamist. When he was the Chief Minister of Kelantan, he banned many aspects of Malay art and culture in the state, because they are deemed as un-Islamic. Nik Aziz also pushed for the implementation of *hudud* laws in the state and was responsible for the 1993 Shariah Bill, which was rejected by the Federal government. During his tenure as Chief Minister, he also made several sexist remarks about women's role in society. He published numerous books on Islam, which made him one of the most influential scholars in the country. He appeals not only to the older generation but also to the young. In a country where politicians drive fancy cars and own big houses, Nik Aziz led a simple life. He stayed in a small house near the mosque and led prayers at the mosque. He was also accessible to the masses.[2] He also kept the opposition together, despite the various parties holding on to different views. His passing in 2015 was a great loss to the opposition. After his death, and the jailing of Anwar Ibrahim (former deputy prime minister of Malaysia who then led an opposition party), the opposition broke their ranks, and PAS separated with the Democratic Action Party (DAP).

Professor Abdul Shukor Husin (b.1942)

One of Malaysia's most prominent Al-Azhar graduates is Professor Abdul Shukor Husin, who has been accorded the title Tan Sri.

He was born in 1942 and grew up in Kampung Tebing Tinggi, Jerantut, Pahang. He received primary education in Pahang but moved to Madrasah Aljunied in Singapore to complete his secondary school education.

Professor Abdul Shukor received his religious education mainly from the Al-Azhar University. He graduated with BA in theology from the university, and MA in faith and Islamic philosophy. Later, he earned a PhD degree from the same university in faith and Islamic philosophy (Bank Islam Website 2016).

His career is mainly in academia: he was the Vice-Chancellor for University Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM). Since 2005, he serves as Chairman for the JKF-MKI, in which all Malaysian Muftis are members. He also holds many other positions in key Islamic Institutions; he is also a member of the Tabung Haji Board of Directors; and a member of the World Fatwa Management and Research Institute (INFAD). He is also internationally renowned because he is an associate with the World Fiqh Academy (Rabitah). Abdul Shukor has published more than twenty articles in Malay and Arabic. He has also published extensively in academic journals (Abdul Shukor 1998, pp. 45–46).

PROMINENT SINGAPORE GRADUATES OF AL-AZHAR

Through my conversations with Al-Azhar graduates, I gathered that the majority of Singaporean Muslims who desire a degree in religious studies prefer to study in the Al-Azhar University. Some of those interviewed consider prominent religious elites in the community as their icons and want to follow their footsteps in studying in Al-Azhar. In the following, I discuss three Singaporeans who are prominent Al-Azhar graduates: the former Mufti of Singapore, Syed Isa Semait; the former judge at Shariah Court,

Ustaz Abu Bakar Hashim; and the present Mufti, Dr Mohamed Fatris Bakaram.

Syed Isa Semait (b.1938)

On 7 February 1972, Syed Isa Semait was appointed as the Mufti of Singapore, only the second after the country's independence in 1965. He was only thirty-three years old then and probably the youngest Mufti in the world at that time (Syed Zakir 2012). The position of the Mufti of Singapore is appointed by the President of Singapore under the Administration of Muslim Law Act (AMLA). The Act was passed in 1968, which also led to the formation of Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (Muis, or Islamic Religious Council of Singapore). Syed Isa was appointed the Mufti in a very challenging time for the country, as it just underwent separation from Malaysia in 1965. The Malay/Muslim community also did not have a very favourable impression of religious elites working too closely with a secular government like the People's Action Party (PAP) (Syed Zakir 2016, p. 212). The community was also in a transition from living in villages to high-rise flats in a country that was undergoing modernization, which also had a significant impact on the religious life. By and large, as the Mufti, Syed Isa served as the highest authority on religious matters, even though a *fatwa* is not binding on Singapore Muslims. In other words, Muslims in Singapore can choose not to heed the *fatwa* of the Mufti and seek opinions of other scholars.

Syed Isa received his early education in Singapore religious schools: from Madrasah Khairiah (Still Road);[3] Malja' al Aitam (later known as Darul Ihsan Orphanage); and then Madrasah Aljunied. Syed Isa has a brother who was also a well-known religious teacher in the community, Syed Ahmad Semait. Syed

Ahmad was active in running a publication business. While in Madrasah Aljunied, Syed Isa learnt to read and memorize the Quran. He also learnt the Arabic language while studying in the religious school. Madrasah Aljunied became a centre of religious learning in Southeast Asia. In fact, Madrasah Aljunied serves as a transit point for many students who wished to study in Al-Azhar, including Malaysian Abdul Shukor as mentioned earlier.

Upon graduating from Madrasah Aljunied, Syed Isa did several odd jobs, including being enlisted in the Vigilante Corps to learn fire rescue and life-saving skills (Syed Zakir 2012, p. 23). After a two-year stint in the organization, he joined the Malayan Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve. Syed Isa spent several months in the volunteer reserve, before receiving an offer from the Al-Azhar University. The principal of Madrasah Aljunied then, Abdullah Sheikh Balfaqih, provided a recommendation letter for Syed Isa to pursue his dream in joining the Al-Azhar University. Syed Isa was offered a scholarship by the university. Only four other places were allocated for Singaporeans. The other Singapore students, however, had to pay for their journey to Egypt.

In all, Syed Isa spent eight years studying in Egypt. While at Al-Azhar, Syed Isa had to enrol into a secondary school first before he was allowed to join the university, as his qualification from Madrasah Aljunied was not recognized by the university then. The Singapore students' competency in Arabic was insufficient (Syed Zakir 2012, pp. 32–33). While studying in Al-Azhar, Syed Isa was active in forming student bodies. He left Singapore for Cairo at a time when politics back at his home was in turmoil. Singapore joined Malaysia in 1963 but left only after two years. Syed Isa joined Al-Azhar when Singapore was part of Malaysia, hence he mingled actively with the Malaysian student bodies. After Singapore's separation from Malaysia, he built Singapore's

very own student body in Egypt, called Perkemas (Singapore Students Welfare Assembly in Cairo).[4]

Abu Bakar Hashim (b.1934 – d.2005)

Another prominent Singaporean religious teacher who graduated from the Al-Azhar University is Ustaz Abu Bakar Hashim. Abu Bakar was born in 1934. He had a strong interest in religious knowledge since his childhood. His father, Haji Hashim Abdullah, was an entrepreneur who set up Haji Hashim Bookstore located at Arab Street. He received his religious education in Singapore, at Sekolah Melayu Kota Raja and then Madrasah Aljunied (Firdaus, Wan Hussein and Mohd Raman 2010). In 1959, he went to Kolej Islam in Malaysia (Malaysian Islamic College). He then taught briefly at the Toa Payoh Primary School, before pursuing his degree in Theology at the Al-Azhar University. Abu Bakar then obtained his master's degree from the same university four years after obtaining his BA degree. According to Syed Isa, Abu Bakar was a strong candidate to be Singapore's Mufti but he declined the offer. Instead, Abu Bakar requested Syed Isa to come back to Singapore and accept the position.[5]

After returning from Cairo, Abu Bakar was employed as a Kadi and an official at the Registrar of Muslim Marriages (ROMM). He held that post between 1966 and 1984. He was then appointed as the President of the Shariah Court and served up to 1994. He continued to serve as an Ad-Hoc President until his retirement in 1999 (Firdaus, Wan Hussein and Mohd Raman 2010, p. 139).

He also served in Muis and other religious bodies. Between 1972 and 2004, he was a member of the Fatwa Council, and between 1995 and 2001, he was a member of the Muis Council, a non-executive advisory body to the organization. In 1993, he led the Singapore Islamic Scholars and Religious Teachers Association (Pergas), an NGO that looked into the welfare of

religious teachers in Singapore. Later, Pergas assumed the role of an alternative *ulama* body to Muis. He held many other positions in the community, including as the Chairman of Madrasah Aljunied. He was also active in counselling activities. Abu Bakar passed away in 2005.

Dr Mohamed Fatris Bakaram (b.1970)

The current Mufti of Singapore, Dr Mohamed Fatris Bakaram, is also an Al-Azhar graduate. He had earlier attended Madrasah Aljunied. In 2011, Dr Mohamed Fatris assumed the role of the Mufti, taking over from Shaikh Syed Isa Semait. This made Dr Mohamed Fatris the third Mufti of independent Singapore. He received his early education at Pasir Panjang Primary School and then proceeded to do religious studies at Madrasah Aljunied. He went to Al-Azhar in 1988 and graduated in 1993. Upon graduation, Dr Mohamed Fatris taught at Madrasah Aljunied. He also served as an officer in Muis and then as the principal of Madrasah Al-Irsyad Al-Islamiah. In 2004, he became the deputy Mufti to Syed Isa.

Dr Mohamed Fatris, however, did not pursue his master's degree at the Al-Azhar University. Instead, he opted to do his MA degree with International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM). He then proceeded to do his doctoral degree at the University of Birmingham.

After assuming the role of the Mufti in 2011, he had to oversee many religious controversies in the community. The religious community in Singapore had observably become more conservative than the one under Syed Isa Semait. Dr Mohamed Fatris also had to respond to questions that Muis is not an independent institution, one that mainly takes its orders from the government. Moreover, the Mufti has to respond to calls on the ground which wanted the Singapore government to rethink

its position of disallowing girls from wearing the *hijab* (headscarf) in schools. Dr Mohamed Fatris stepped out numerous times condemning every act of terrorism. The Mufti is also active on the social media and adopts poetry as a means to reach out to the masses.

AL-AZHAR AND RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

As Chapter 4 will demonstrate, Al-Azhar remains the most popular destination to obtain Islamic studies degrees for students from Southeast Asia. The reason for its popularity is because of historical factors. Moreover, Southeast Asian Muslims are comfortable with the brand of Islam it teaches. Cairo remains their main destination, even though Saudi Arabia is the centre of Islamic world today, and Saudi universities offer more lucrative scholarships to Asians. Students continue to choose Al-Azhar in Egypt, even though studying in Saudi Arabia would bring them closer to Islam's holy sites in Mecca and Medina.

Al-Azhar graduates continue to be celebrated in the region. They hold important positions of influence in the country. Even though the Southeast Asian countries are largely multireligious and secular, Malaysia and increasingly Indonesia have demonstrated a more Islamic character from 1970s onwards. This phenomenon has been described by scholars as the Islamic resurgence movement. This movement, which called for the reaffirmation of Islamic values in the public sphere, took cue from the Middle East, including Egypt. Some of the Muslim religious leaders on university campuses were inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood movement in Egypt, and organized their masses in the manner the organization mobilized the student movements. Most of these student leaders who are involved in

the movement had studied in Al-Azhar and occupy important positions in the religious establishment in their respective countries. Some are appointed as Muftis (in Malaysia) or leaders in the religious bureaucracy.

Highlighting the prominent graduates from the three countries shows the diversity of Al-Azhar students, in terms of their occupation, worldview and influence. To be sure, some of these Al-Azhar graduates went into politics, while others joined the government service. These graduates also uphold different political ideologies, which again proves that one cannot speak of a homogeneous Al-Azhar "school of thought" which some graduates suggest.

What follows in Chapter 4 is an examination of the impact of Al-Azhar education in Southeast Asia, particularly among Singapore students. Does the political upheaval in Cairo affect the religious discourse? There is a tendency for religious discourse in authoritarian regimes to be one of the unquestioning types. So, how does this impact Singapore students?

Notes

1. The original title for the journal is *Djama'ah al-Chairiah al-Talabijja al-Azhariah al-Djawaiah* or *Welfare Association of Jawa Student in Al-Azhar*.
2. I had the opportunity to interview Nik Aziz Nik Mat several weeks before the Malaysian 13th General Elections at his office in Kota Bharu, Kelantan. Although a Chief Minister, he remained accessible to researchers.
3. Madrasah Khairiah was not a full-time school, according to Razif, who is an Al-Azhar alumni. Interview with Razif, 2016.
4. Interview with Shaikh Syed Isa Semait, former Mufti of Singapore, 2016.
5. Interview with Shaikh Syed Isa Semait, 2016.

Chapter 4

AL-AZHAR TODAY
The Experience of Singapore Students

Aspiring Southeast Asian religious teachers regard the Al-Azhar University as one of the best Islamic centres of learning in the world. Some of the current students posit that their parents encouraged them to pursue their education at the university. Some were inspired by their local teachers, who are also alumni of the university. Many young religious teachers I spoke to idolized the Al-Azhar University, and quite a number mentioned that it was their childhood dream to study there. Current Singapore Al-Azhar undergraduate, Abdul Malek, mentioned that the very first time he entered one of Al-Azhar's lecture halls, he recalled: "Oh! Syed Isa Semait used to sit here, and so did Dr Fatris Bakaram!".[1] Abdul Malek felt that his idols used to be students of the university, and many other Singapore Al-Azhar students will follow their trajectory and become religious scholars in Singapore. Others shared having some form of spiritual attachment to the university, claiming that "Al-Azhar is the land that gave birth to many prophets". All these factors add up to the reasons why

many Southeast Asian students, including those from Singapore *madrasahs*, aspire to study in Al-Azhar.

Al-Azhar has produced many *ulama* in the region, trained in theology, exegesis, jurisprudence, Hadith (narrations by the Prophet Muhammad) and morality from Al-Azhar. Despite graduating from the same institution, the religious outlook of Al-Azhar former students varies from one to another. There is no one "Al-Azhar school of thought" that graduates suggest. When asked what studying in the university entails, the graduates would say: Al-Azhar teaches moderate Islam or *wasatiyyah*. What the students hope to achieve at Al-Azhar may not necessarily be accomplished. As discussed in Chapter 3, upon returning to their country of origins, Al-Azhar graduates ventured into different fields; most came back as religious teachers, while others joined the bureaucracy, started their own businesses, and went into politics. For those who went into politics, they may even join opposing camps.

This chapter examines the religious experience of Singapore students studying in Al-Azhar. It accounts for the challenges they faced throughout their three or four years of study in Egypt and also features some anecdotes and interviews from current Al-Azhar students and alumni from Singapore. It will also highlight some survey data that I conducted with thirty-seven current Al-Azhar students from the state. Out of these current students, twenty are male and seventeen female. Majority of these students enrolled in 2010, and by 2017 some of these students have graduated with their bachelor's degrees. The students' field of study ranges from Islamic theology (philosophy and creed), jurisprudence, Arabic language and literature and Hadith. Apart from one student, all those surveyed have studied in one of the Singapore *madrasahs*.

CHOOSING AL-AZHAR

From the survey, two-thirds of the respondents said that Al-Azhar was their first choice. Recent Al-Azhar graduate, Asmah Hashim, said that it was her personal decision to study at Al-Azhar, even though she did well in her GCE "O" Levels examinations and qualified to enter a good junior college (JC, or pre-university college). She said, "Although I did well in Maths and Science, at that point in my life [after the GCE "A" Levels], I was really interested in *fiqh* [Islamic jurisprudence] and wanted to learn more about how Islamic rulings were made."[2] Many of Asmah's contemporaries also felt that going to the university was a dream come true. Al-Azhar's prestige in being the premier institution of Islamic learning is key in determining their choice. Hamidah, a graduate from the university, shared that

> Since I was 10 years old, I have made up my mind to study at Al-Azhar. In my family, only my sister and I were enrolled into the *madrasah* system. I studied religion in [a class] conducted at my grandfather's house, [and] I was impressed by the religious teacher [who conducted the class]. So I chose to enter the *madrasah*, and my goal was to study at the Al-Azhar University. In school, I focused on the religious subjects. Even though I was persuaded to study at a Malaysian university, my mind was set to study at Al-Azhar.[3]

Similarly, current Al-Azhar student, Usman, received many offers from universities in Africa and Middle East. Yet, he chose Al-Azhar because of its prestige over other universities in Kuwait, Medina, Dubai, Jordan and Abu Dhabi.[4]

Although studying at Al-Azhar was a personal choice for many students, many more felt that they followed their parents' wishes. Some parents chose to send their children to *madrasahs* so that they have a better chance to study at Al-Azhar later. In

Singapore, parents have the option of sending their children to national schools, which are funded by the government. Abdul Malek, for instance, shared that he wanted to join a top junior college in Singapore, but his parents encouraged him to go to a *madrasah* instead, which would then pave his way into the Al-Azhar University. His parents wanted him to become a religious scholar or *alim*.[5] According to Luqman Hakim, a third-year Al-Azhar student,

> I personally decided to study at Al-Azhar. I had no other relatives pursuing an Islamic degree or equivalent. In addition, even though my parents would give unwavering support to whatever I chose to study, I knew that they wanted me to further my studies in this [Islamic studies] field, so I chose to go with that.[6]

He also added another motivation for studying in Al-Azhar: he felt that by being in the Al-Azhar University, he was in the company of renowned Islamic scholars. He also said that by being in Egypt, he would be able to visit important historical sites in the country. Egypt, to Luqman, is a tapestry of different civilizations.[7]

One student pointed out an interesting comment on why he chose Al-Azhar: "I was forced to study in Egypt because I was a naughty boy and it was my parents' decision [to send me to Egypt]." This is also a reflection of the attitudes of some parents whom I came across, and they posit that religious education, through the *madrasahs* and the Al-Azhar University, can create morally upright individuals.

Another similar case was already quoted at the beginning of this monograph, the views of Fazlurrahman Sidek, who was eager to join one of Singapore's polytechnics after his "A" levels, but his parents urged him to study religious subjects at the Al-Azhar University.[8] Current third-year student in Al-Azhar,

Johan, provided an interesting anecdote why he ended up studying in the university despite being reluctant initially.

> Initially, I was one of the students who [being in one of the local *madrasahs*] was inclined towards pursuing my studies in the academic field as my school generally motivated and openly encouraged its students to go to local institutions, such as the polytechnics. Thus, at that point of time, my mind was already fixated on going to a polytechnic. The reason why I changed my mind was because of my mother. She never really forced me into making any decision, but as a son who knew his mother's innermost thoughts, I felt responsible, being the first son in the family to carry out her wishes. I was still in Secondary 5 then with graduation day approaching. Thus, I consulted a few of my teachers prior to making a final decision, and they assisted me to come to a decision. I would say it was a collective effort; my teachers, my friends and parents all motivated me in treading down the very path I was reluctant to walk initially. It was a personal choice made from countless support and guidance in assuring me that I would not regret my decision and that it was an excellent one made, and till this day, that thought really pushes and motivates me to delve deeper into Islamic education.[9]

Former Al-Azhar graduates are also crucial in encouraging young *madrasah* students to further their studies in the university. Abdul Malek said that he wanted to pursue a degree in Al-Azhar because he was following the footsteps of other Singapore religious elites who graduated from the same university. From my survey, a handful pointed out that the current Singapore Mufti, Dr Mohamed Fatris Bakaram, who is an Al-Azhar alumnus, inspired them. Another name commonly mentioned is Dr Nazirudin Mohd Nasir, who is also a graduate of the university and currently a Senior Director in the Islamic Religious Council

of Singapore (Muis). Some school principals also encouraged their students to pursue a degree from Al-Azhar. Kasmawati — an Al-Azhar student in the 1980s — was encouraged by her teachers to study in Al-Azhar. Her teacher said that Al-Azhar is the oldest university in the world and the most established one in the Islamic world. Moreover, the fact that most of her teachers graduated from there also motivated her to follow their footsteps. She said, "When I think about Al-Azhar, there is a kind of voice whispering to me, why not go to Al-Azhar?"[10]

Interestingly, no respondents commented on how Al-Azhar's curriculum structure or syllabus attracted them. The students' choice mainly rested on emotional attachment to the university as well as their mentors who had impressed them. Very few pointed to the quality of the academic scholarship in the university as an influencing factor. Only three respondents mentioned an Egyptian scholar, Sheikh Abdul Maqsoud, who shaped their decision. The late Sheikh Maqsoud was an Al-Azhar representative who taught at Madrasah Aljunied in the 1980s to 2000s, and these students might have heard good reviews from graduates of the *madrasah* who were once taught by him. Another student interviewed said that he was fascinated by Sheikh Ali Gomaa — the former Mufti of Egypt — who once studied Islamic jurisprudence at the Al-Azhar University.[11]

Affordable school fees and cost of living in Egypt were also other important considerations why Southeast Asian students, including those from a developed country like Singapore, chose Al-Azhar. Former students shared that they did not require any scholarships from Al-Azhar to study at the university, and to begin with, Al-Azhar scholarships are very difficult to obtain.[12] Students can generally afford to study in Al-Azhar without any scholarships from Muis. Some students obtained assistance from Malay/Muslim organizations in Singapore, including the

Prophet Muhammad's Birthday Memorial Scholarship Fund Board (Lembaga Biasiswa Kenangan Maulud, or LBKM) and the Muslimin Trust Fund Association (MTFA). Yet, majority of students made their own arrangements to make ends meet in Egypt. Some shared accommodation with other fellow students from the same country, while others stayed on campus housing that offered cheaper rates. Those with more resources would live outside campus compounds. Abdul Malek shared that it was his mother who helped fund his studies in Egypt.[13] He also mentioned that housing in Egypt is affordable. Another student, Fatimah, shared her accommodation with three other students.[14] Senior students in their third and fourth years helped juniors source for accommodation.

The education in a local *madrasah* also affects a student's choice in applying to Al-Azhar or other Middle Eastern universities. Most graduates of Madrasah Aljunied would pursue their degree in Al-Azhar. For the 2010 batch, about 90 per cent of students in Madrasah Aljunied went to Al-Azhar. Although Madrasah Al-Maarif also sends its students to the Al-Azhar University, the majority pursues education in non-religious fields via local polytechnics or universities. Those majoring in Islamic studies also enrolled in universities in neighbouring Malaysia.

The main difficulty facing Singapore *madrasah* students who wish to study at the Al-Azhar University is that for many years there were no formal ties from any of the Singapore *madrasahs* with the university. It was only in 1975 that Madrasah Aljunied established a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the university, allowing direct entry of its students to the courses offered by the university.[15] Previously, most *madrasah* students had to undertake a diploma in Islamic studies in Malaysia before enrolling into Al-Azhar.

For Madrasah Aljunied students today, the path to Al-Azhar education is much clearer compared to the past. Razif, who graduated from Al-Azhar in the late 1990s, claimed that for his cohort, only four — one female and three male students — out of sixteen students in his class continued their studies in the Al-Azhar University. Now, the number of students from the *madrasah* pursuing tertiary education at Al-Azhar has increased to about sixty to seventy students per cohort.[16] Razif's batch did not have that many options upon leaving the *madrasah*, and they were likely to proceed to Al-Azhar. It was only later that the other *madrasahs* established MOUs with their Egyptian counterpart, so that they can directly send their students to the Al-Azhar University.[17]

Kasmawati Ibrahim, an Al-Azhar student in the 1980s, shared the difficulties of non-Aljunied students wanting to pursue their degree in Al-Azhar. She recalled that for her cohort, only four students from Madrasah Al-Maarif went to Al-Azhar, but they had to go through the Malaysian education system first. They studied at a boarding school in Kelantan for five weeks in order to obtain a certain certificate called the Higher Islamic Religious Certificate (Sijil Tinggi Ugama, or STU) before heading to Al-Azhar. The STU is a pre-university certificate that is recognized by the Al-Azhar University. She then spent four years at the Al-Azhar University (1987–91). Other Singapore students who did not go through this method opted for long-distance learning. Some only spent one to two years in Egypt and studied mostly in regional colleges approved by the Al-Azhar University. For instance, they completed three years of their religious education in a college in Malaysia, and moved to Egypt for the final year. Such students would eventually graduate with an Al-Azhar degree.[18]

Hamidah is one student who had to go through the longer route. She had to take the Malaysian Higher Islamic Religious

Certificate (Sijil Tinggi Agama Malaysia, or STAM).[19] She was unlucky because the Malaysian government no longer recognized the STU due to the UMNO-PAS conflict; students must only take the STAM to be able to proceed to Al-Azhar. She obtained her certificate from a boarding school in Johor (southern state in Peninsular Malaysia). After obtaining the STAM certificate, she proceeded to complete her degree in Al-Azhar where she joined the final year (she only spent a year at Al-Azhar). For Southeast Asian students who are weaker in their Arabic language, they joined Al-Azhar in their third year (hence they spent one to two years in Al-Azhar for the bachelor's degree). Different from the case of Kasmawati, Hamidah enrolled into the Malaysian Islamic education system for three years.

In the 2000s, there were greater efforts by Singapore religious teachers and *madrasah* principals to send Singapore students directly to Al-Azhar, without having to obtain recognition from Malaysian religious schools. Since 2010, Singapore students across all *madrasahs* have been able to spend their four years studying in Egypt, as a result of the MOU between the university and Southeast Asian students.[20] Normally, Singapore students who wish to study a full programme in the university would come from Madrasah Aljunied.

Before this agreement between Singapore *madrasahs* and Al-Azhar, Malaysia was the destination for Singapore students before heading to Al-Azhar because there were institutions there that have made ties with the Middle Eastern universities. Students coming from Malaysia were also better prepared before heading to the Middle East. My interview with Dr Saliman, currently an academic at the Islamic Science University of Malaysia (USIM), shows how he was well prepared before enrolling into the bachelor's programme in the university.[21] After completing his primary education in Malaysia, Saliman went to Egypt to undertake

the secondary school education. He went to Egypt in 1996 and entered the secondary school system before going into Al-Azhar. He used his time there to improve his Arabic and to familiarize himself with the Egyptian education structure. This experience allowed him to have a smoother transition into the "Al-Azhar culture". He went straight into the second year of the secondary school, and hence he completed the secondary education in three years instead of the normal four years. He was also exposed to the Al-Azhar syllabus when he was in secondary school. "The subjects taught here were very basic, and it helped me understand the demands in the university later," Saliman recalled.[22]

Malaysian institutions are more advanced in forging relations with the Al-Azhar University. Thus, diploma holders from these recognized Malaysian institutions could directly go to Al-Azhar if they meet the university's requirements. Singapore *madrasahs* are late players in establishing such relations, with the exception of Madrasah Aljunied.[23] Malaysia's relations with the university explain why a number of Singapore *madrasah* graduates going to Malaysian colleges are seeking their diplomas in order to gain access to Al-Azhar. For Nurul Syifaa, she did her pre-university education in a Johor *madrasah*, called MARSA. She studied in Johor, which was not the common option for many Singapore students at that time.[24]

The trend of having parents and teachers encouraging their children to study at Al-Azhar continues to this day, despite the political uncertainty in the Middle East including Egypt. In a data provided by Muis, Al-Azhar clearly remains the most popular destination among Singapore students who wish to pursue religious studies in the Middle East (Table 4.1).

The statistics shows that Egypt is the most popular destination for students pursuing Islamic studies degree in the Middle East, and Saudi Arabia is the second most popular destination. These

TABLE 4.1
Singapore Students in Islamic Institutions in the Middle East (2011–15)

Country	*2011*	*2012*	*2013*	*2014*	*2015*
Egypt	158	186	250	296	277
Jordan	2	6	20	70	76
Saudi Arabia	33	43	53	60	50
Yemen [Not fully captured due to lack of a Letter of No Objection]	18	38	29	49	38
Kuwait	10	15	17	20	20
Turkey (Scholarships started from 2012)	NA	3	5	9	8

Source: Muis.

data are accurate because all Middle Eastern universities require a letter of recommendation from Muis, as a statutory board in Singapore, before students enrol in the universities. The data for Yemen may not be accurate because there is no requirement for a recommendation Letter of No Objection. Still, I reckon the number of students travelling to Yemen does not exceed the figures for Al-Azhar and Saudi Arabia. The data show that in 2015, close to 60 per cent of *madrasah* students extending their studies in the Middle East chose Egypt. This happened even though Saudi Arabia provided more generous scholarships compared to Al-Azhar. As discussed previously, Egypt is preferred because they teach religion which is in line with the Sunni or *ahlus sunnah wal jamaah* (ASWJ) school of thought and the Shafie school of

jurisprudence. On the other hand, Saudi Arabian universities are believed, at least in the minds of Southeast Asian students, to promote Wahhabi-Salafi school of thought, which considers many religious practices by Muslims here as innovations (*bida'ah*) and astray from pure Islam. These practices include celebration of the Prophet's birthday (*maulid*), visitations to graves of pious Muslims (*ziarah kubur*), and communal feasting (*kenduri*). The number of students enrolling in universities in Jordan has been increasing steadily over the years because the universities have opened up to foreign students, and also it is the most politically stable Middle East country.

Interestingly, Al-Azhar students who have returned to Singapore upon completion of their studies shared that they received better treatment and respect from society compared to their friends studying in other Middle Eastern universities. These graduates claim that the alumni from other universities were "jealous" of them. Abdul Malek opined that "Muis hosted a special graduation ceremony for Singapore Al-Azhar graduates, but not for [graduates from] other universities. And Muis also had a special sending off for those fresh undergraduates to Al-Azhar."[25] Abdul Malek and another student, Alman, shared that in 2012, Al-Azhar, Medina, and the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) students had audience with the Singapore Mufti, Dr Mohammad Fatris Bakaram. What was supposed to be a Hari Raya (Eid) gathering turned out to be a feedback session by the other non-Al-Azhar graduates who expressed their unhappiness for not being given the same treatment as Al-Azhar graduates. The level of treatment Al-Azhar students assume they would get from Muis as well as society could be yet another reason why they chose Al-Azhar; they feel their teachings would be accepted by the masses compared to graduates from other universities. Lately, Muis has also increased

its efforts to engage students from other universities in Middle East apart from Al-Azhar.

CULTURE SHOCK IN AL-AZHAR

Despite being a Muslim-majority country and once a centre for Islamic civilization, Egypt is a very open society and not an Islamic state. The country has been under military dictatorships since 1952, when the Egyptian revolution happened. The revolution overthrew the monarchy and installed a nationalist leader Gamel Abdul Nasser (r.1956–70). For almost thirty years, Egypt was ruled by a military dictator, Hosni Mubarak (r.1981–2011). After the Arab spring in 2011, Egypt was ruled by the Muslim Brotherhood inclined leader, Mohamed Morsi (2012–13). His rule was brief because in 2013, Egypt witnessed another military coup led by military leader Abdel Fattah Saeed Hussein Khalil el-Sisi.

Egypt is a developing country, and some of the Singapore students who went to Al-Azhar shared their difficulties in adapting to the Egyptian way of life. The main complaint is the language barrier. Many Singapore students are trained to speak in *fushah* or the modern standard Arabic. But upon arriving at the Cairo airport, these students had difficulties communicating with the local Egyptians because they spoke colloquial Egyptian Arabic. Salbiah said, "The first time I arrived in Cairo, I experienced a culture shock because of the different environment, particularly language barriers. Egyptians speak *ammiy* (colloquial) Arabic whereas in our local *madrasahs* [in Singapore], we were taught *fushah* Arabic."[26] Even then, the level of Arabic taught in local *madrasahs* may not be sufficient for them to communicate effectively with the locals. Out of the thirty-seven students surveyed, only a quarter of them claimed to be proficient in Arabic. Close to 70 per cent of the students surveyed said their Arabic is only satisfactory.

Nashitah, a third-year student at the university, shared the language difficulties of Singapore students. She believed the main challenges for her were settling down in Egypt and the language differences. According to Nashitah,

> Difficulties that I face everyday are the language and the culture. Learning Egyptian [dialect] is not easy because it's different from the Arabic that I learnt in our *madrasahs*. When we can't fully acquire the language, it's difficult to understand what our lecturers say because most of them will speak in their own slang. Apart from [facing difficulties with] the lectures, we faced challenges when it comes to settling our visas, the transportation system, and dealing with the locals. I dare say that some are slightly uncivilized and it's not easy to have a coherent conversation with them.[27]

Singapore students also complained about the university's inefficient administrative system. The university administration still manages student records and documents manually, and the use of computers and IT is low. Sharing the same sentiments, a student, Luqman Hakim, was little upset with the administration of the university. He remarked candidly,

> Another challenge is obviously the lack of an effective management system on Al-Azhar's part, and basically all of Egypt as well. Things like paying school fees and buying my books proved to be a hassle which would always take up more than a day, sometimes up to a week. Do not get me started on renewing my visa. It has always, since the time of my teachers, been lacking. God knows when they will consider upgrading themselves.[28]

The university's administration is not the only gripe among Singapore students; they have similar feedback when applying

or renewing their student visas. Abdul Malek said, "We had to queue or seven hours to renew our visa." According to some respondents, Singaporeans are used to a systematic way of doing things in their home country and studying in Al-Azhar opens their eyes to the developing world. Another current student Fazlurrahman shared a similar experience.

> Before I came here, I was informed that Egypt is unsystematic. But I did not know it was *that* bad. I was really shocked … the process of applying for visa is like a *jihad* (struggle). [We are] like in a warzone. I was shocked. And even though you may be the first to reach (the visa application centre), that doesn't mean you get to be the first person in the queue. Only the strongest and fittest get to be in the queue; it is not on a first come first served basis. That is a struggle, being pushed around, and what more with my small physique ...[29]

Adding to that, Singapore students were shocked to witness the behaviour of some Middle Eastern students. In the lecture halls, some students smoked when lecturers were not present, a sight that they would never expect to see in Singapore universities. Fatimah shared her experience of being bullied, and this also happened to a number of female undergraduates within her circles.[30] Also, some of the Singapore undergraduates claimed that they experienced some form of prejudice while studying in Al-Azhar. The Arab students referred to them as Chinese, Japanese, or Korean.[31] Some female students were cautious when they were out of their homes because there have been cases of harassment towards Asian students. Hence, Singapore students had to adhere to some form of curfew, in which they were not allowed to go out alone at night. If they had to leave their apartments in the evening, they had to be accompanied by one male student. For Suhaila, students had to adapt to the Egyptian way of life. "The people were also different. But as time goes by, we have also

become like them. We won't get bullied easily. But some Arabs treated the Asians well, and their behaviour is different when they were with their own community and when they are with us."

For some students, they believe the university did not invest much to meet modern needs of education, and this can be observed in terms of teacher–student relations and inadequate infrastructural developments in the campus. Johan, a current student, complained that the number of students in each class is overwhelming. This certainly has an impact on student–teacher relations, which can be improved with smaller classes. At times, he had difficulties in finding a seat in the lecture theatre. At times, he ended up standing throughout the lesson.[32] Abdullah shared about the poor student–teacher relations in Al-Azhar classes. He said,

> In the Faculty of Islamic Jurisprudence, there are thousands of students in a lecture hall. When that happens, students are not able to engage in discussions with the teachers. These discussions are very important in shaping the students' minds and way of thinking.[33]

Certainly, students complain that the teacher–student ratio was not conducive for learning. Some students claimed they were disheartened to attend classes because of the poor classroom environment.

In the survey, I asked the students to rate their level of interaction with non-Southeast Asian students. I wanted to understand whether Middle Eastern students are distancing themselves from Asians and vice versa. Close to 14 per cent said that they were very satisfied with the level of interaction, while one-third claimed they are satisfied. Close to 45 per cent said they had mixed feelings about their interaction with the Arabs and those from the other regions. This trend is worrying especially if there is a lack of intercontinental exchanges and learning among

students. The fear is that when they do not mingle with others, they are merely exposed to what they would have already studied in Singapore *madrasahs*. This also means they are not exposed to students following other schools of jurisprudence, including how they pray, their legal rulings, and mode of thinking.

However, some students who have stayed longer in Egypt integrated better into the Egyptian society. They had more time to blend into the non-Asian circle of friends. Usman, a twenty-one-year-old student majoring in Islamic history, came to Egypt at the age of thirteen. He completed his primary school education at Madrasah Aljunied and continued his secondary and pre-university studies in an international high school in Cairo. According to Usman,

> As I am actually used to having friends from all around the globe in my high school days, adapting to a similar environment was not much of an issue. I personally disagree that language barrier should be a challenge for religious scholars, as most of the written historical text are in Arabic, to have a better understanding of the context, we need to improve our grasp of the Arabic language.[34]

Despite having to overcome Third World standards, Singapore students never complained about the knowledge gained from the university. They held their lecturers in high regard. According to Abdul Malek, while Singapore students had a high regard for their local teachers (in Madrasah Aljunied), they were also privileged to meet the scholars in Al-Azhar. They felt that Al-Azhar academics adopted the *wasatiyyah* approach — moderate ideas suitable for Southeast Asian societies. Al-Azhar academics gave students a whole spectrum of thought and allowed students to choose whichever sects they are comfortable with. Abdul Malek noted that he studied the subject of comparative religions while in

Al-Azhar, but he did not see any form of bias in the way religion is taught to him.[35] Many students highlighted that Al-Azhar academics spoke about other faiths, such as Christianity and Judaism, but did not mention the rightness of Islam.

Majority of the students surveyed are satisfied with the learning experience in the university. Out of the thirty-seven students surveyed, 13.9 per cent are very satisfied, 47.2 per cent satisfied, and 33.3 per cent felt they are neutral. As for the guidance provided by the lecturers in the university, 41.7 per cent of the students are satisfied, 13.9 per cent are very satisfied, 33.3 per cent gave mixed feelings about the lecturer's guidance, and 11.1 per cent said the guidance was unsatisfactory. Although the majority are satisfied with Al-Azhar education, the fact that almost one-third had mixed feelings calls for a rethinking whether the university met the expectations set by parents who sent their children to the university. More should be done by the religious elites in Singapore and also former students to educate parents and advise them on the challenges facing Al-Azhar students from Singapore.

INFORMAL CURRICULUM

Generally, the mode of learning or religious transmission in Al-Azhar has not altered much since its founding during the Fatimid Caliphate. Dodge (1961) highlights various modes of knowledge transmission in the university in the tenth century. Some of the subjects taught in the Al-Azhar University mainly deal with the religious sciences. They include the Arabic language, grammar (*an-nahwu was sorf*), rhetoric (*al-balaghah*), literature (*al-adab*), Quranic readings, commentary or exegesis (*tafsir*), traditions (*al-Hadith*), law (*al-fiqh*), jurisprudence (*usul al-fiqh*), theology (*al-kalam*), the rational sciences, mathematics, and logic (*mantiq*) (Dodge 1961, p. 41). These subjects remain until today,

even though students are encouraged to take more than one of these specializations. Moreover, these subjects are taught and organized according to the degree programmes in various faculties. Singapore students normally enrol into one of the following degree programmes: *shariah* (Islamic law), Arabic language and *usuluddin* (theology). Those enrolled in theology can specialize in Hadith (narrations by the Prophet Muhammad), *tafsir* (exegesis), *dakwah* (preaching) or *aqidah* (faith) in their third year.

However, attending lectures offered by the university is not the only path to learning. Most students shared that learning can be done outside the classroom environment. Some of the students study more through informal circles, *halaqah*, commonly found within the university compounds, rather than in formal university lectures. In these *halaqahs*, students sit in a circle around the teacher, who will refer to a particular text and discuss it. The students in return may ask the teacher for clarification about the text in question. The students would then religiously record whatever the teacher has said. Through the *halaqah* system, students have more opportunities to learn outside the university setting, which also means that they can be exposed to alternative views. According to Hatina (2010), "Most of the student's time was devoted to memorizing the religious literature, which was perceived as the indisputable truth, and maintaining a slight connection with the centres of civilization in Western Europe that dictated the topics of study and their extent" (p. 21). Student Abdul Malek suggests that increasingly more Singapore students join these *halaqahs*, a tradition which has existed for centuries in Al-Azhar. The public is also welcome to learn about Islam from the Al-Azhar scholars in the mosque through this mode of learning. According to Gesink (2009),

> renowned institution like Al-Azhar attracted many who were not students in the technical sense. Anyone wishing to add to his

> knowledge of religion was welcome to listen to a reading and glean from it what value he could. These ephemeral listeners did not proceed through lessons according to the logic of the system; they came to hear famous scholars read or to hear a famous text read. (p. 19)

According to Alman, *halaqah* sessions expose students to the different schools of jurisprudence: Shafie, Hanbali, Maliki, and Hanafi.[36] Some students who wish to learn through the *halaqah* system would come to the Sultan Hassan Mosque, one of the many places that houses these study circles. In fact, students are also open to study about other non-Sunni sects, including Shiism. This proves that Cairo is a lively city for religious knowledge, and students are exposed to a buffet of religious ideas and orientation.

Confirming that Al-Azhar students are exposed to all kinds of schools of jurisprudence, Razif said that:

> In the subject of *fiqh*, Al-Azhar teaches us all schools of jurisprudence (*mazhabs*), but there is a specific subject that each of us has to take. If you are a Shafie, you are required to join the Shafie class. But there is only one Shafie class, while the rest is all about the other *mazhabs*. If you are Hanafi, then you go for a Hanafi class. If you are Maliki, you go to a Maliki class. There's one particular subject for *shariah*. So in a way, we are learning deeply about the particular school, understanding the *mazhabs* properly. But at the same time, we are not denied learning the other *mazhabs*. Even among our lecturers, some may not necessarily be from the Shafie *mazhab*. So this is what I think we learn: to understand, accept views and respect others. In terms of the way they train us, I think they are very open. So that is what I like about Egypt.[37]

Razif said that the curriculum in Al-Azhar requires students to undergo examinations, but they are not the endpoint of learning.

Grade is not everything in Al-Azhar, and it is up to the students to structure their own learning styles. There are pros and cons to this approach, according to Razif. An unstructured system like the one in Al-Azhar may not work well for students who lack discipline. But the system itself will not allow a student who does not attend classes to pass.[38]

While one can generally frown upon students not attending classes in the university and choosing to network with *ulama* outside the campus, the current students surveyed feel that learning can also exist outside campus. When asked how they rate the experience of networking among students in the campus, about 6 per cent of the students feel they are very satisfied, 19.4 per cent feel satisfied and 58.3 per cent indicate neutral as their response. Around 61 per cent of the students indicate that they attended all the classes offered in the course, and a third of the respondents attended less than five classes in a week. A meagre 6 per cent of students attended less than three times a week. One-third of the respondents feel that they learn more about Islam from the classes outside campus than through campus. When asked whether they participated in campus organizations by students outside Singapore, only 52.8 per cent claim they had done so, and this group include those who participated in Malaysian and Indonesian student organizations.

An interesting anecdote from a current female student, Asina Sapuan, confirms the need for students to be disciplined when studying in the university. According to Asina, "For me personally, the main challenge is keeping myself disciplined to study in Al-Azhar due to the fact that there is no attendance taken throughout the lectures in Al-Azhar."[39] Asina, however, felt that students can gain from personal coaching if they approach the academics outside class because students do not capture the attention of their lecturers in the classroom settings.

THE AL-AZHAR METHODOLOGY

Many of the students whom I interviewed and surveyed agree that the form of Islam Al-Azhar promotes is suitable for the Southeast Asian context. This was the reason why some chose to study in Al-Azhar even though other Islamic universities in the Middle East, such as those in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan, offer better scholarships to students. An example given is that the Al-Azhar University is neutral towards the celebration of the Prophet's birthday or *maulid Nabi*. According to some, Wahhabi-Salafi, a puritan Islamic orientation promoted in universities in Saudi Arabia and Jordan, has no place in the Singaporean society.

Some of the students argue that the university also exposed them to Western philosophy. It also teaches Greek philosophy, from Plato to modern thinkers, such as Sigmund Freud.[40] What is unique about the university, however, is that it never imposes a particular school of thought. Some students shared that they were also exposed to Shiism and Mu'tazilah (rationalism). Some of the Al-Azhar teachers would say in class that "This is my opinion that I am teaching you; what you understand and how you want to understand is entirely up to you."[41]

Even on many issues, Al-Azhar teachers disagree among themselves. Their disagreements are, however, polite and often not discussed in the public domain. There are anecdotes saying that some scholars and teachers disagree with the Sheikh of Al-Azhar working closely with President El-Sisi. Disagreements are mainly private opinions, but they will still support the highest authority of the university in other ways. According to Saliman, a Malaysian academic who studied in Al-Azhar, the university functions as a uniting point for many Egyptians and Muslims around the world. Al-Azhar mainly teaches the Ash'ari school of thought, as it is the school that Egyptians adhere to. But the

teachers are tolerant towards other schools of jurisprudence as well. For the case of schools of jurisprudence, Al-Azhar mainly teaches all four schools.

Nonetheless, some students complain that the teaching methods remain outmoded. Johan, a third-year student, claimed that the traditional orthodox style of learning in Al-Azhar proves to be far behind many other local and regional universities. Students are not given many assignments to do, which would bring them closer to reading materials and alternative viewpoints. It affects us in ways that really undermine the students' ability to perform in the university despite them having the skills to perform well if given assignments and presentations.[42] Current student, Abdullah, suggests that

> In terms of research assignments, the learning environment among students is extremely minimal. Egyptian students sometimes show less interest towards studies when they are expected to finish lessons and syllabus quickly. The school's system is also a disadvantage for me.[43]

Depending on the courses taken, most students are required to memorize their subjects. Students majoring in the Arabic language concur that memorization is essentially their mode of learning. For example, Asina mentioned that

> I think my subjects are mostly based on memorization and only some based on understanding. I mean, it's like you have to memorize the formula or foundation, then you can apply it on the questions given. As for the critical thinking, my faculty doesn't emphasize much of that; my curriculum is based more on memorization.[44]

Asina ended up taking courses at the American University of Cairo where she enjoyed more critical thinking. Another student, Sujak Rahmat, said that

> Most of the curricula are based on memorization. Only some require critical thinking. As a student from the Faculty of Islamic Jurisprudence, most of the critical thinking are already filed under cases. We have to read all these cases and memorize the reasoning and evidence from the Quran and Sunnah.[45]

Khoirun, a current student in Islamic jurisprudence, was more outspoken when asked about the teaching methods in Al-Azhar. He said that there are hardly any critical thinking: "The method that the university offers is a one-way learning style with the lecturers reading off their thesis books or the old books whereas the students occasionally interrupt with a differing opinion or just the usual want-to-know-questions."[46]

But for many, the Al-Azhar education opens up their minds to alternative ideas. According to Osman Hasyim, a current student majoring in Islamic theology and philosophy,

> I learned that even if we differ in opinions regarding the various groups within our religion, it should not break us apart as Muslims. A person can have different ideologies about certain things, but as a person of religion, we should respect one another and not easily condemn others. Islam teaches us to be neutral and moderate and not to be too extreme about an issue. Hence, if you are uneasy over something, do not fight your way through the problem, instead solve each difficulty with ease and wisdom. If a brother or sister in Islam is astray, lead them continuously to the right path with patience.[47]

PERCEPTIONS OF AL-AZHAR GRADUATES TOWARDS OTHER MIDDLE EASTERN UNIVERSITIES

Graduates from Al-Azhar University claim that they find difficulty in securing well-paid jobs. This is among the issues raised during dialogues with Singapore politicians. These graduates end up

working in mosques, private Islamic institutions, and in Muis because there is a perception that with a bachelor's degree in Al-Azhar, these graduates are not well equipped to work in schools and *madrasahs*. There is a perception that a Bachelor of Arts degree from Al-Azhar is equivalent to a diploma. They were told that the local mosques need more manpower and hence religious graduates can be employed in mosques. However, the graduates prefer to work in the government sector, which offers better employment terms, even though the primary motivation of most of these graduates in pursuing their studies in Egypt despite the challenges is to help the community. Some Al-Azhar graduates also work as translators in foreign embassies where there are some Singapore students furthering their studies in those countries.

The religious elites who were not trained in Al-Azhar dispute this perception. One of them is Shamsiah, who sits in the management board at Madrasah Al-Maarif. Whether or not a graduate is from Al-Azhar is not an issue. Shamsiah added that she does not feel discriminated for her religious credentials. What is important is that she is able to show her capability, especially her command of the Arabic language. Every year, Madrasah Al-Maarif, which takes in only female students, enrols sixty-six students at the primary level. At the secondary level, students from other *madrasahs* are free to join Al-Maarif as well. Madrasah Al-Maarif is a hybrid *madrasah* that allows secular and religious streams. The students will be assessed at the end of their third year in secondary level. According to Shamsiah, the Al-Azhar system is not clear (*tak jelas*). Some students from Al-Maarif related their experience by saying that they studied their post-secondary education in Malaysia only to join Al-Azhar in their fourth year. In other words, while they obtained their bachelor's degree from the Al-Azhar, they spent only one year studying in Cairo.[48] But, according to Shamsiah, the system has now changed.

Al-Azhar has implemented an entrance exam that all Southeast Asian students have to undergo; there is no more direct access.

In terms of timing, Singapore students who enrolled into Al-Azhar also face another disadvantage. Al-Azhar's annual intake begins in March whereas Singapore students receive their college examination results in that month too. Therefore, those who intend to continue their studies at Al-Azhar can only do so in the following year. In other words, they have to wait almost a year before they can begin their studies.

Shamsiah recommended parents to consider Malaysian universities, such as the IIUM, as an alternative because of the clearer system there. Unlike in Singapore universities, examination schedules in Al-Azhar are not fixed. Some students are even unsure of the location of their examination halls.[49] Shamsiah felt that other universities in Egypt, such as the one in Alexandria, might be better. One of the Al-Azhar's attractions is that it does not charge high fees to students. For Shamsiah, it does not matter whether her students go to Al-Azhar or, for that matter, further their studies in the field of religious sciences.[50] The main aim of religious education is to train them to be good and morally upright individuals. Incidentally, Shamsiah does not see any form of social problems in the *madrasahs*.

Nonetheless, parents continue to persuade their children to study at Al-Azhar. These include parents from Madrasah Al-Maarif. According to Nashitah, a third-year Al-Azhar student who was from Al-Maarif,

> My parents encouraged me to pursue my studies at Al-Azhar. I was quite reluctant about it at first, but after I did my *istiharah* prayers [prayers asking for guidance from God], I felt more confident with my decision to study in Egypt. I would say it was not my personal or first choice, but Alhamdulillah [all praises to Allah], it all worked out fine.[51]

She added that Al-Azhar is a prestigious and reputable university. She had the opportunity of being introduced to prominent Islamic scholars. She believed that Al-Azhar degrees are more recognized in Singapore compared to degrees from other universities when it comes to Islamic education. She said,

> I think if you want to pursue in Islamic studies, go to an Arabic-speaking country or places where Islam started to flourish since its inception. By doing so, you can expose yourself to a different culture. You can analyse the contrast of how the Egyptians perform Islamic practices and how Muslims in Singapore perform it. It can also enhance your acquisition of the Arabic language. The disadvantage is the distance because I'm miles away from my family and getting homesick is not a good feeling.[52]

STUDENT ASSOCIATIONS IN AL-AZHAR

As mentioned, Syed Isa Semait, former Mufti of Singapore, had a role in forming the student body for Singapore students studying in Al-Azhar. The Singapore Students Welfare Assembly in Cairo (Perkemas) is an independent organization, which was set up mainly to foster friendship and networking among Singapore students and to look into their welfare. It also serves as a support community advising students on job options upon their return to Singapore.

The Singapore Embassy in Egypt also establishes close links with Perkemas. According to Razif, the embassy provides the organization with Singapore newspapers.[53] Representatives from the organization would visit the embassy weekly to collect the newspapers. Access to printed newspapers from Singapore was especially important during the time when newspapers were not available online.

To ensure the safety of students, the embassy stayed in touch with Perkemas whenever there were political conflicts in Egypt. The good relations Al-Azhar students have with the Singapore Embassy existed during the time Syed Isa was studying there. He recalled that he used to accompany the then Ambassador, Professor Ahmad Ibrahim. Syed Isa facilitated many of his programmes with students.[54]

The organization also establishes links with religious institutions in Singapore, particularly Muis and Pergas. When Singapore ministers and Muis officials visited Egypt, Perkemas would facilitate their meetings with Singapore students in Al-Azhar. These visits allowed the ministers and officials to forge a closer relationship with the students and offer advice for their future plans.

The executive committee of Perkemas is normally made up of ten students. Muis and Pergas provided guidance on managing a society and organization. Razif shared that these two organizations taught him how to perform his secretarial duties and how to become a good treasurer. Through these organizations, Singapore students interacted with students from Malaysia who are members of the Persekutuan Melayu Republik Arab Mesir (PMRAM), the Malaysian student body registered with the Egyptian government. Through activities in the student body, they also interacted with other students from Malaysia and Thailand. According to Razif, every time they returned to Singapore, Muis would invite them for discussions to learn more about their experiences in Al-Azhar.

Generally, Singapore students feel that they are more privileged compared to their counterparts from neighbouring Indonesia and Malaysia in terms of support from a government body. Seniors in the student body also guided the juniors in their career options and took care of their well-being. According to Nashitah,

> Even though the number of Singapore students in Al-Azhar is not as many as the Malaysian and Indonesian students, I think we are already well supported by the local authorities. However, we might need help with housing rent that increases every year. Some students are facing difficulty paying their housing rents. More help can be extended in that area.[55]

Although Singapore students generally mingled well with the Egyptians, some do face discrimination from their schoolmates. According to Johan,

> Egyptians in general, or at least the ones studying in Al-Azhar, were not very friendly with Asians. We face a little discrimination here and there. Additionally, the administration offices situated beside our faculty were really inferior compared to other universities in Egypt. Note that I am not comparing them with other overseas universities.[56]

Most Singapore students in Al-Azhar prefer to mingle with students from their own country. Huda Asyik, a female student who graduated in 2016, said that she interacted with some Middle Eastern students. However, she interacted more with students from Southeast Asian countries.[57]

SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS FROM LOCAL INSTITUTIONS

Support from the Singapore Islamic organizations, such as Muis and Pergas, were also highlighted by the respondents of the interviews and surveys. Generally, current Al-Azhar students are satisfied with the assistance provided by the local organizations. They were given adequate briefings before they depart for the Al-Azhar University.[58] However, students who studied in the university in the 1990s had a different experience. According to

Salbiah who studied in Al-Azhar between 1992 and 1998, these institutions did not highlight her departure to Egypt or support her studies in Al-Azhar. Students today are more privileged because they are given briefings and courses to familiarize themselves with the Egyptian system. During her time, it was the *madrasah* that equipped her with the knowledge about Al-Azhar. She recommended that Muis conduct workshops to equip students with the Arabic colloquial language and career paths upon graduation.[59]

Salbiah also raised several issues in which local authorities could do more to help the *madrasahs*. First, Muis could provide subsidies for accommodation. Second, even though many students feel the tuition fees are generally low, Muis could help pay part of the fees. Third, Muis should always be in contact with the family members in Singapore and ask if they require any help. Such complaints as voiced out by Salbiah are common among students even though they realize that joining religious schools is a matter of personal choice. The Singapore government highly subsidizes national schools and local universities. As such, those who choose to join the religious system should be aware that the community must not be held liable to pay for their religious education.

Nevertheless, lately local Malay/Muslim organizations have been forthcoming in providing support to Al-Azhar students. According to a current student, there are bursaries and financial assistance offered by organizations like LBKM and Mendaki (Council for the Development of Singapore Malay/Muslim Community) each year. According to Johan, a current student in Al-Azhar, each student is entitled to S$1,800 to S$2,000 yearly from these organizations.[60] Due to the low cost of living in Egypt, this amount is considered sufficient in helping Al-Azhar students with their living expenses. Other than monetary contributions,

the students also need help in developing skills that cannot be obtained while studying in Al-Azhar. The students would like to be given opportunities to attend workshops, additional courses and internships when they are back in Singapore for summer holidays.[61]

CONNECTION WITH TERRORISM

One issue that has been of interest among academics recently is whether Southeast Asian students are radicalized by the Middle East or whether they are becoming Arabized. A preliminary report by Bubalo, Sidney and Nava studied Indonesian students in Egypt and Turkey.[62] The report looked at four broad categories, namely, perceptions of cultural differences, attitudes to democracy, attitudes to religion and society, and attitudes to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). This current book, however, covers different sets of questions, namely, the religious experience of Singapore students. The issue of them becoming radicalized is a non-issue as my observations point out that they are generally non-violent although religiously conservative. Their conservatism also differs from one generation of graduates to another.

In fact, from the survey, most students are not overly concerned with politics in Egypt. Close to 83 per cent of the students followed local Singapore politics and issues very closely while they were studying in Egypt. Only 39 per cent claimed they followed Egyptian political developments closely. It shows that their primary aim in going to Al-Azhar is to gain religious knowledge.

Many of the Al-Azhar graduates also pointed out that the university teaches moderation in their religious discourse. Some of the alumni I interviewed proudly pointed out that Al-Azhar had never produced any terrorists. According to Saliman, to his knowledge, no terrorist efforts in Southeast Asia, including the

Philippines and Thailand, came from the Al-Azhar University.[63] True enough, most of the Al-Azhar graduates who serve in the religious bureaucracies, at least in the Southeast Asian context, are open to dialogue among other religious groups.

The majority of the Singapore students did not participate in political groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood. According to Asina,

> Following the political developments: not so much, but I do equip myself with the general gist of what is happening and the reason behind all these protests and riots, and I don't really quite follow the political developments, but I do take note of what's happening around Egypt especially during the riots and protests. I am not very updated, but I think the most recent political development would lead to inflation of prices, which is currently happening here.[64]

Thus, there is no evidence to link terrorism with the Al-Azhar University. Singapore students are generally aware of political developments in Egypt, but they do not participate in any political activities there. This is not to deny that some may follow the teachings of the Muslim Brotherhood movement and how it organizes its *dakwah* programmes. Yet, Singapore students have generally been able to immerse themselves back into multireligious and multicultural Singaporean society.

EMPLOYMENT

Many Singaporeans have raised the question of the type of jobs that religious studies graduates can perform. The dominant discourse is that they would end up being religious teachers. And how many religious teachers does the Singapore Malay-Muslim community need? Most of the current Al-Azhar students pointed out they are quite relaxed when it comes to their career paths.

Some pointed out they are unsure of what they will become upon graduation. Out of the thirty-seven students surveyed, 47 per cent claimed they did not receive much career guidance from their mentors and seniors in the university. This may be because the seniors themselves were unsure of their plans after graduation. But majority of those studying in Al-Azhar (and also those enrolled in *madrasahs*) feel that they wanted to have a career in the religious sector. Ideally, they wanted to be employed by Muis. Some would prefer to work in the mosques sector or the Shariah Court.

There are minimal job vacancies in the religious bureaucracy in Singapore that could absorb all the Al-Azhar graduates. Even in these institutions, they would have to compete with Muslim professionals who obtain degrees from the local universities such as the National University of Singapore (NUS) or the Nanyang Technological University (NTU). The religious elites are mainly trained in the religious sciences and they may not be suitable for other areas such as policy work, finance and IT.

The general problem is that the *madrasahs* have the tendency to overpromise parents that all *madrasah* graduates have the option to choose either the religious or the secular sector later on in their lives. This means that the *madrasah* provides dual education, the best of both religious and secular subjects. In fact, some of the Al-Azhar students have high ambitions, such as wanting to become social workers, teachers and psychologists. Some even ventured into what are deemed as non-religious areas such as videography. Others aspire to be translators. Some clearly stated from the beginning that they wanted to be a freelancer or to run a business. According to Johan,

> I am clear about career opportunities upon graduation, and contrary to popular belief, an Al-Azhar graduate does not necessarily have to work as a religious teacher. Careers such as

> a photographer, designer and financial consultant have proven to be possible despite graduating from an Islamic university. I know of some Al-Azhar alumni who have taken up these jobs. Most of our seniors are willing to share their experiences after graduating and have shown to be an adequate source of guidance for us. Despite all that, we are still lacking in confidence in attaining our goals. We view ourselves as being inferior to graduates from other local universities like the NUS or NTU, or regional universities like UIA or UM.[65]

However, some students understood the challenges after graduation. According to Usman,

> I understand the challenges and difficulties the religious scholars face upon graduation. The religious institutions in Singapore are a small circle. There are not many job opportunities or vacancies. Even if there are, it would be very competitive and only the best would get it. It is also important for us to upgrade ourselves and be prepared with different set of skills such as business, psychology and social skills.[66]

According to Asina,

> I think one of the disadvantages of graduating from Al-Azhar is the limited career choice in Singapore. If we are considering a career within the Singapore government sector, a degree from Al-Azhar will not get you a job. When I recently applied for a job in the government sector, I noticed Al-Azhar University was not listed as one of the recognized universities. As for the advantages, I think we gain a lot of experience. We do not only gain knowledge but we learn how to live our life in Egypt, and also we learn how to adapt.[67]
>
> Personally, I think that career opportunities in Singapore are quite limited and that there are many graduates not only from Al-Azhar but also from other universities. So, if you ask

> me whether I am clear about the career opportunities, I'm not that clear, but I'm not that clueless about the opportunities. I mean we have to find the opportunities and not wait for them to come to us. The seniors do help. I have approached some of them for career recommendations and also guidance. I think it's important for us to find people who can help us like agreeing to be our referees for our future jobs. So I think, yeah, the seniors are quite helpful in this aspect.[68]

According to Khoirun, a student currently majoring in Islamic jurisprudence,

> In Singapore's context, a perfect match of degree certification with the job is becoming rare. People are crossing over to other fields for their careers. Students of Islamic knowledge have to face the reality of scarce job opportunities. Hence, undergraduates should be more innovative and creative in choosing the sector that they would like to flourish in and make an impact that could help the community, and at the same time help them earn a livelihood to survive in Singapore.

Khoirun believed that more can be done by the local authorities to help Al-Azhar students. They need to improve the students' skills in IT and other areas that are crucial in Singapore's economic, social and religious landscape. This can be done either by hosting the programmes themselves or outsourcing the training to other organizations. He mentioned that some seminars organized by Muis Academy and the "Take the Leap" programme organized by Impian Pergas were good initiatives to reconnect overseas students with the reality in Singapore. He also suggested that the Fatwa Committee could hold a programme for undergraduates to understand the real problems facing the community and to set up standard operating procedures to be taken when dealing with the problems. A step-by-step procedure of the previous case

could be presented and a simulation of a current problem could be an activity for the undergraduate. The bottom line is that Muis and Pergas can help the students prosper in Singapore's ever-changing landscape to align with the skills and knowledge that other mainstream universities offer, such as IT and administration skills, attachments and mentoring).[69]

In most cases, parents were the ones who motivated their children to enrol into the Al-Azhar University because of its prestige in the Islamic world. In order to be considered for entry into the university, they would have to enrol their children in one of the local *madrasahs*, and the *madrasah* that sends the most students to Al-Azhar is Madrasah Aljunied. Increasingly, the other *madrasahs* too are establishing ties with the Egyptian university so that their students can also be considered for entry.

However, what parents expect their children to gain from the university may not be realized. Students surveyed and interviewed generally enjoy their learning experience in the university. Yet, they are not aware of the challenges that await them — they have to adapt to Third World conditions, with inadequate learning infrastructure, large class sizes and outmoded learning styles. Some students complain that they mainly interact with their countrymen or those from the Southeast Asian region, mainly because of security issues and discrimination. Language is also a barrier for the Singapore students. In reality, Al-Azhar students are worried about securing jobs and proper career guidance. They are concerned mainly about society's perception on their Islamic studies degree in an increasingly competitive job market.

Notes

1. Interview with Abdul Malek, Al-Azhar student, 2016.
2. Interview with Asmah Hashim, Al-Azhar graduate, 2017.
3. Interview with Hamidah Awang, Al-Azhar graduate, 2017.

4. Interview with Usman Salleh, current Al-Azhar student, 2016.
5. Interview with Abdul Malek, Al-Azhar student, 2016.
6. Interview with Luqman Hakim, Al-Azhar student, 2016.
7. Ibid.
8. Interview with Fazlurrahman Sidek, 2017.
9. Interview with Johan, third-year Al-Azhar student, 2016.
10. Interview with Kasmawati, Al-Azhar alumni (1980s), 2016.
11. Interview with Abdullah, third-year Al-Azhar student, 2017.
12. There were two bursaries from the Al-Azhar University and Majlis A'la from the community in Egypt.
13. Interview with Abdul Malek, Al-Azhar student, 2016.
14. Interview with Fatimah, Al-Azhar alumni, 2016.
15. Abdul Samad Junied, *Perkembangan Pendidikan Islam Di Singapura: Satu Kajian Kes Madrasah Aljunied Al-islamiyah, 1970–1990* (Singapore: AFIA Media International, 1999), attachment 4A, p. 302.
16. Interview with Razif, 2016.
17. Ibid.
18. Interview with Nurul Syifaa, Al-Azhar alumni (2004/05), 2016.
19. Interview with Hamidah Awang, Al-Azhar alumni, 2016.
20. Interview with Suhaila Mohd Haron, Al-Azhar alumni, 2016.
21. Interview with Dr Saliman, lecturer in a Malaysian university, 2016.
22. Ibid.
23. Interview with Shaikh Syed Isa Semait, former Mufti of Singapore, 2016.
24. Interview with Nurul Syifaa, 2016.
25. Interview with Abdul Malek, 2016.
26. Interview with Salbiah, Al-Azhar student, 2016.
27. Interview with Nashitah, Al-Azhar student, 2016.
28. Interview with Luqman Hakim, Al-Azhar student, 2016.
29. Interview with Fazlurrahman, 2017.
30. Interview with Fatimah, Al-Azhar alumni, 2016.
31. Interview with Alman Nimat, Al-Azhar Alumni, 2016.
32. Interview with Johan, 2016.
33. Interview with Abdullah, 2017.
34. Interview with Usman Salleh, Al-Azhar student, 2016.

35. Interview with Abdul Malek, Al-Azhar student, 2016.
36. Interview with Alman Nimat, Al-Azhar alumni, 2016.
37. Interview with Razif, 2016.
38. Ibid.
39. Interview with Asina Sapuan, 2016.
40. Interview with Dr Saliman, 2016.
41. Ibid.
42. Interview with Johan, 2016.
43. Interview with Abdullah, 2017.
44. Interview with Asina Sapuan, 2016.
45. Interview with Sujak Rahmat, 2017.
46. Interview with Khoirun, current Al-Azhar student, 2016.
47. Interview with Osman Hasyim, current Al-Azhar student majoring in Islamic theology and philosophy, 2016.
48. Interview with Hamidah Awang, Al-Azhar alumni, 2016.
49. Interview with Shamsiah, 2016. Some students point out that the situation has improved lately and that examination schedules are now fixed.
50. Interview with Kasmawati, Al-Azhar alumni (1980s), 2016.
51. Interview with Nashitah, third-year Al-Azhar student, 2016.
52. Ibid.
53. Interview with Razif, 2016.
54. Interview with Shaikh Syed Isa Semait, 2016.
55. Interview with Nashitah, 2016.
56. Interview with Johan, 2016.
57. Interview with Huda Asyik, recent graduate, Al-Azhar, 2016.
58. Interview with Abdullah, 2017.
59. Interview with Salbiah, Al-Azhar student, 2016.
60. Interview with Johan, 2016.
61. Ibid.
62. Anthony Bubalo, Sidney Jones, Nava Nuraniyah, "Indonesian students in Egypt and Turkey", Lowy Institute Report, 15 April 2016 <http://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/indonesian-students-egypt-and-turkey>.
63. Interview with Dr Saliman, 2016.

64. Interview with Asina Sapuan, 2016.
65. Interview with Johan, 2016.
66. Interview with Usman, 2016.
67. Interview with Asina Sapuan, 2016.
68. Ibid.
69. Interview with Khoirun, current student of Islamic jurisprudence, Al-Azhar University, 2016.

Chapter 5

CONCLUSION

Would the political turmoil in the Middle East deter parents from sending their children to study in Al-Azhar University? Is Al-Azhar education suited for the modern world? Al-Azhar has been the centre for Islamic education in the world since its inception in the tenth century. The university has produced prominent *ulama* in the Malay world, and some made their mark as the countries' Islamic intellectuals and thinkers. They have contributed in scholarship, led Islamic bureaucracy, and most importantly, became the voice of conscience to the community.

Prominent Al-Azhar graduates from Singapore include the former Mufti, Shaikh Syed Isa Semait and the current Mufti, Dr Muhammad Fatris Bakaram. Some of these Al-Azhar graduates ended up as judges in the Shariah court, but most of them serve in the local mosques and teach in local *madrasahs*. Al-Azhar remains the popular destination for Singapore religious studies students because of the closeness in terms of religious orientation between Singapore and Egypt, in which both communities largely follow the Shafie school of thought. Even though Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states offer Singapore students lucrative scholarships, and also close proximity to Islam's holiest sites in Mecca and

Medina, Al-Azhar remains Singaporean Muslims' top choice. The other popular destination for students would be Malaysia, but the universities in the country also modelled their curriculum after the Al-Azhar University.

Through my conversations with Al-Azhar graduates from different cohorts, I find that there is not much generational divide in terms of experience of students studying in Al-Azhar. Their style of learning continues to emphasize on memorizing, even though, increasingly, there has been more emphasis on critical thinking. Some students complain that they would learn more if they are given more assignments because that would bring them closer to reading materials, where they would have to source for books not assigned by their lecturers. This has been the practice in modern universities. Moreover, classes in the Al-Azhar University are not compulsory for the students, and they need to be motivated and disciplined in order to come to campus, even though the system has penalties for students who skip classes regularly: they will not be able to pass their exams well if they miss classes often, because they are not familiar with the issues raised in class.

In terms of efforts by local institutions, there has been greater assistance by Muis and Pergas extended to Al-Azhar students today compared to those in the 1990s. This perception is gathered through comparing the narratives from students from the two eras. However, students expect more to be done by the local authorities to meet their needs, especially on housing and guidance. This is not to say that local religious institutions have not helped them: Malay-Muslim NGOs and the state have provided assistance to them. The students — as well as their parents — must realize that enrolling into *madrasahs* and Islamic universities instead of embarking on national education is a personal preference because Singapore national schools are subsidized by the state. The state

has a bigger obligation to serve the needs to all communities and not be obligated to the demands of a segment within the Malay/Muslim community. Undeniably, majority in the community have no qualms studying in national schools, and they do not consider studying in these schools will make them less Islamic. The cry for the need to create a class of *ulama* or religiously trained scholars rests on the community and not the state.

For Singapore's Malay/Muslim community, there is a greater respect for the Al-Azhar University more than that for other Islamic universities in the world. Political uncertainty in the Middle East, including in Egypt, is causing some parents to rethink about sending their children to study in that region, although the numbers enrolling into the Al-Azhar University remain consistently high. Some parents are exploring alternative routes for *madrasah* graduates, and more students are now applying to study in neighbouring Malaysia. How Singapore's religious institutions can assist these students remains questionable, given that the entry requirements into these alternative universities are not as stringent as compared to Al-Azhar. Moreover, the quality of religious education may not be on par with that offered by the Al-Azhar University.

There are different perceptions into what Al-Azhar education leads to. Some argue that they are comfortable with their career options because they saw their seniors doing well in the religious sectors. Others remain uncertain in terms of what their certificates could bring in the context of ever-changing global economy, especially in Singapore where they are competing with other religious studies graduates from other parts of the Middle East and neighbouring Malaysia, and also those trained in secular subjects. Commenting on career opportunities, Salimah, a current student, suggests that, "Honestly, career opportunities are quite vague for Al-Azhar students. We often hear about how it's hard

for graduates to find a proper job in the *ukhrawi* (religious or otherworldly) sector in Singapore."[1] Another current student, Sharifah, is also unsure about her career choices:

> Truthfully I see that my seniors themselves are not sure what career path to take. I personally I don't think that just getting a degree from Al-Azhar would be enough for me. I'm thinking of continuing my studies and then after that I'll find my path for myself […] it's always [working at the] *madrasah* or *masjids* (mosques). I want to see more of our Al-Azhar graduates out there; not just *masjid* or *madrasah* but really helping the public.[2]

But some current students feel that the Al-Azhar experience opens their eyes to living in a developing world. To quote the views of a current student, Osman Hasyim:

> Singaporeans are spoilt for choice. The comfortable lifestyle that our parents' have provided us is a luxury. Hence coming here is a definite change of atmosphere. From having to deal with "cockroach-infested" house to lining up for 7 hours just to get our visa and then only to learn that we have to come again another day for the visa. The culture here is quite rowdy. To be living in a green and litter-free country [referring to Singapore] with disciplined Asians is a privilege. Over here [in Egypt], we are taught to live in whatever condition that comes our way, be it fighting with an Arab to buy our university books or sexual harassment in public transports. But all in all, Egypt is definitely a game changer [for life].[3]

Yet, comparing with the Al-Azhar graduates from Indonesia, there are questions that need to be addressed in terms of how to better prepare Singapore students studying in Egypt. The quality of Indonesian students proved that Al-Azhar graduates can be good religious scholars of equal standing to those found

in the Middle East. Questions remain if it is Al-Azhar which has to shoulder the blame if the quality of religious education is less than satisfactory, or should there be a rethinking of efforts to improve the quality of the local *madrasahs* before they send their students to Egypt. Singapore has yet to produce any student who can reach a PhD level at Al-Azhar, which could have raised the bar for local students. Indonesians have graduated from Al-Azhar with PhDs and they are in a different league in terms of their Islamic discourse. The experience of Professor Quraish Shihab, who obtained a PhD from Al-Azhar showed that exposure to different schools of thought can produce a progressive and moderate religious scholar. Quraish has demonstrated the ability to master sources that the normal Al-Azhar graduates would be familiar with. His mastery of Arabic grammar, as well as socio-historical conditions shaping the Arabian society of the time of Prophet Muhammad, has enabled him to come up with progressive religious ideas and opinions.

So far, Singapore *madrasahs* have not been able to equip their students with good command of the Arabic language to do well for the Al-Azhar University. A student, Abdullah, acknowledged that the *madrasah* he graduated from had prepared him with the necessary tool in Islamic studies, but not Arabic language. He opines

> During my pre-university years in Madrasah Aljunied, we were taught various Islamic studies which include *mantiq*, *qawaid fiqhiah* (general rules of jurisprudence), *balaghah* and *adab* (Arabic Rhetoric of Meanings and Literature). It helped me a lot here as I would already have an idea of what the subject is about when it is being taught. The *madrasah* has given us the keys to these knowledge and made it easy for us to understand [lessons]. But I think we need to improve more on the Arabic language. We may face difficulties in Egypt if we do not strengthen our

> command of the language. I feel that once we have mastered the language, we will be able to gain and benefit a lot in Egypt.[4]

The call for local *madrasahs* to improve the standard of teaching Arabic is also shared by student Salimah, who said that, "I think that the local madrasah should train future students to be fluent in Arabic, especially in conversing. For me, despite being in a *madrasah* for years, I have still yet to master my Arabic when I came here… Hence the language barrier [in Egypt]."[5]

All in all, there are segments in Singapore that have glorified Al-Azhar as the most prestigious institution of Islamic learning. I have started this monograph by highlighting some of the views of Singapore parents in sending their children to Al-Azhar in order to groom them to be a religious scholar or *alim*. On the other hand, there are groups who are critical of Al-Azhar, pointing out their outmoded teaching methods. The experience of Singapore students show that they have much to benefit from studying in Al-Azhar. Studying in Egypt not only opened their perspective to religious education but also to the Egyptian way of life, which is that of a developing country. The bottom line is that students should aim high when studying in Al-Azhar. They should tap on Al-Azhar's vast heritage and open their minds to study under different teachers from different schools of thought. Institutions in Singapore also have a role to play in encouraging Singapore students in Al-Azhar to learn from the different teachers and move beyond the classroom setting. They should continue engaging the students and also plan programmes in order to complete what Al-Azhar could not offer, such as courses on Singaporean society. These students must also be equipped with important skills that they can use for employment.

Al-Azhar has been around for almost a 1,000 years, and it is unlikely to change the way it disseminates knowledge to the

students. Within the last five decades, the political climate of Egypt has changed regularly, but the situation in the Al-Azhar University has not been affected. The onus is on students to make what is best for them when they pursue a degree in the university. The experience of past graduates in the region tells us that Al-Azhar has produced progressive scholars as much as it has produced conservative, revivalist, and traditionalist types. Students have to tap on Al-Azhar's rich history and resources and think of themselves as someone who can bring back the knowledge gained in improving his or her society's living conditions.

Al-Azhar alumni from Southeast Asia have contributed to the running of religious institutions back at their home countries. Those whom I interviewed claimed that the university taught them to be moderate Muslims. Can one then say that Al-Azhar offers a school of thought which is different from other universities in the Middle East? It is impossible to hypothesize whether the current Al-Azhar students will come back to their home countries with a single monolithic ideology. Nevertheless, judging from the earlier batches of Al-Azhar graduates, it is clear that there is a variety in terms of their style of thought. Majority returned as popular preachers, teachers at the local *madrasahs*, or they serve in Islamic bureaucracies. In the case of Malaysia, some Al-Azhar graduates have participated in politics. In Indonesia, some have become prominent *ulama* with progressive and liberal orientations.

I reckon that the Al-Azhar University serves as an extension of what Southeast Asian students have learnt from their local *madrasahs*. They engage with religious texts in a deeper way compared to those who have not studied in the university. Yet, the extent to which students benefit from the university depends very much on how prepared they were from the local *madrasahs*. Here, I feel Indonesian students in Al-Azhar have an edge over their Malaysian and Singaporean counterparts. The Indonesian

boarding schools are more focussed in teaching religious subjects to their students, while those from the Singapore and Malaysia would have to juggle between religious and secular subjects. This explains why Singapore students are generally not very proficient in the Arabic language when they enter Al-Azhar, while their Indonesian counterparts do not complain about having such difficulties. Some Malaysian students whom I interviewed also did not face much difficulty with the language, but these students came to Egypt at an earlier stage of their educational life — meaning they were accustomed to the secondary and pre-university levels which facilitated their transition to the Al-Azhar University. Comparing the different experience of Al-Azhar students from Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia, or the so-called Malay-speaking world, demonstrates that Singapore *madrasahs* have to rethink about its aims: they should focus on producing quality *ulama* or religious teachers.

Arguably, Al-Azhar has shaped the Islamic religious discourse through the students for centuries, and this trend will not change drastically. Over the last few years, there have been a growing number of religious institutions formed in the region. Globalization has also made religious education more accessible to the region, and students need not travel to the Middle East. Al-Azhar not only remains traditional in terms of its curriculum, but also in terms of the learning method. To date, it has not had any major overseas campuses, or long-distance learning degrees. Its outmoded nature is not being criticized, but celebrated as a way to defend Islamic learning method and tradition.

Notes

1. Interview with Salimah Wahid, 2017.
2. Interview with Sharifah, 2017.

3. Interview with Osman Hasyim, current Al-Azhar student majoring in Islamic theology and philosophy, 2016.
4. Interview with Abdullah, 2017.
5. Interview with Salimah Wahid, 2017.

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- *The Traditionalist Response to Wahhabi-Salafism in Batam*, Trends in Southeast Asia, no. 7/2017 (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2017).
- *Johor Remains the Bastion of Kaum Tua*, Trends in Southeast Asia, no. 1/2017 (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2017).
- *Faith, Authority and the Malays: The Ulama in Contemporary Singapore* (Singapore: Malay Heritage Foundation and Select Books, 2015).
- "'Deviant' Muslims: The Plight of Shias in Contemporary Malaysia", in *Religious Diversity in Muslim-Majority States in Southeast Asia: Areas of Toleration and Conflict*, edited by B. Platzdasch and J. Saravanamuttu (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2014), pp. 359–78.

The Al-Azhar University has separate campuses for male and female students. Shown here is the campus for male students.
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The Al-Azhar University has been the centre for traditional Islamic learning for aspiring *ulama* for centuries. This is the condition of its classrooms.
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A lecture hall in the university. Students often complain that the halls cannot accommodate the large number of students who come from all over the world.
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A typical lecture setting at the male campus.
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Classrooms at the university. Singaporean students, used to having well-equipped and modern classrooms in Singapore *madrasahs* and schools, have to adapt themselves to the condition of the classrooms.
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Long queues are common when students have to settle administrative matters including visa application, visa renewal and paying of school fees.
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A clerk handling student records. Most administrative matters are still done manually.
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A glimpse of some of the academics at the university, dressed in traditional scholar garb.
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A lecturer conducting an oral examination.
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An oral examination for Quran memorization in progress. Invigilators will randomly call students to come to the podium to recite selected verses from the Quran in front of the class.
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A typical scene at Rabaáh El Adawiyah district from where female students take public transport to go to campus.
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An invited scholar addressing Singapore Al-Azhar students. The visit was organized by Perkemas.
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Dr Mohamed Fatris Bakaram, Mufti of Singapore (left) and another Muis official interacting with Singapore students during their visit to the Al-Azhar University organized by Perkemas.
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The Faculty of Islamic Studies at the Al-Azhar University.
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Egypt was once a centre of Islamic civilization and has always been the centre of Islamic learning. One of its main attractions is the pyramids.
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The Al-Azhar University remains the top destination for Southeast Asian students pursuing an Islamic studies degree. The university, built in the last millennium, has been able to withstand competition from modern universities across the globe and continues to produce influential Islamic studies graduates. What are the motivations of students pursuing a degree at Al-Azhar? What are the challenges they face? Are they certain of their future and career opportunities upon their return to Singapore? This book combines both qualitative and quantitative analysis of former and current students at the Al-Azhar University. It not only hopes to develop more critical analysis of returning Al-Azhar graduates but also attempts to understand the deeper connections between Muslims in Southeast Asia, particularly Singapore, and the Middle East.

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